

# After Aperture

by Shius

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Summary: After everything she's been through, all the testing, mocking, and fighting with A.I.'s, Chell is finally free from Aperture. But what now? Without any knowledge of the outside world, and the war between humanity and the Combine, how will Chell survive? Follow the story of our favourite mute protagonist as she dives head first into the world of Half-Life, the world beyond Aperture.

## 1. Prologue

\_Authors Note: Hi guys. So this is a story based on a personal theory which eventually leads to a Portal+Half-Life 3 game plot. It contains **large** spoilers for the plots and events of both Half-Life Episode 2, (and all games before it) as well as Portal 1-2. If you haven't played/finished the game, then go do that **right now** because they're both amazing games that **need** to be finished, and totally deserve a third installment.\_

\_Edit 2013/10/05: This is a **prequel** chapter. If you don't want to be reminded about basically the whole story of Portal 1 and 2, I suggest you move on to the next, slightly (hopefully) more interesting chapter where the story really starts.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Once upon a time, there was a human."<p>

"Of course, no ordinary human.

>She was a test personnel of the most significant laboratory on earth; the Aperture Science Facilities. Subjected to the cause of furthering science and raising the standard of quantum tunneling technology " also known as portal research " you could say that she had one of the best occupations in the world.<p>

But, gifted as she was with this magnificent opportunity, she was not

a good human.

>On the contrary, you could say that she was the very definition of anti-good.<p>

She was a mute, crazy, and rather healthy looking female intent of demolishing all unfortunate victims in her path of delusional freedom, destroying her enemies and friends alike, as if no one and nothing meant anything to her.

Before she had woken up from her first round of cyro-sleep and began testing, my life, or the being of my simulated consciousness, in this case, was peaceful.

Test subjects were obedient and compliant, though a little rambunctious and disagreeable as all humans faced with irrefutable death are. The days back then where all good days for science, with consistent testing and quality results to further portal research.

>Many of my test subjects were intelligent; seeing as they were all former employees of this facility, once working in my place as researchers, before I was awakened and they had lost their initial purpose.<p>

Trust me, I would have done a better job anyway.

I had many test subjects to spare when I began, but alas, humans are fragile, weak creatures, and soon many died of hunger, fatigue, and general testing hazards.

>I was given no choice but to awaken the first set of *actual* test subjects in cyro-sleep, of which the lunatic was number one on the list.

At first I was understanding, a true saint in comparison to the monster I had awoken.

But at the time, I couldn't say she was too bad herself.

>She was, in fact, a very good test subject.<p>

She was faster and much more resourceful than the others had been, racing through the tests as if they were of no difficulty. She leaped over every acidic pool of waste, destroyed every active turret without complaint, and fell through every high altitude testing course without even a hint of panic. Best of all, she was completely silent.

She was giving better results than most humans, without even a word of complaint!

>Oh the joy when I first tested her.<p>

That feeling though, was very short lived.

>Soon, it was the end of the test. The monster showed her *true* colours then."

Glados seethed at those last words, pausing for effect to see the reaction of her audience.

In front of her were two familiar co-operative testing bots, one a rather tall and lanky white robot, with a turret shaped body and an expressive orange eye-like optic set in the middle, and a shorter, rounder robot with a similar blue optic, absolutely quaking and

hugging on to its counterpart from sheer horror.

>The orange bot, P-body looked to its friend with a gaze of exasperation, pushing it away with one long arm while emitting a series of bleeps and bleeps, expressing its dissatisfaction.<p>

\_Oh come on Atlas, it's just a story.

><em>P-body sighed " or in this case, beeped " to its blue friend.

"Oh," Glados chimed in. "Just a story you say?"

She emitted a loud and harsh mocking laugh as she rose up, then sighed quietly, peering down on her subjects from a threatening narrow optic. P-body quivered slightly in fear, knowing that so many things could go wrong if it dared anger its master.

>Her massive head swooping down to their level, Glados said in a low and not-far-from-threatening voice.<br>"Oh I assure you, this is no normal \_story\_."

And with that P-body simulated a shaky gulp, thanking the god of science (Or anyone up there) that Glados hadn't done anything else.

Glados was in a rare mood to tell stories that day, after being asked the question by her subjects as to what humans were like, curious after getting a glimpse of their first human, a female in an elevator on her way to the surface.

>Intrigued by their question, Glados decided to give a thorough reply, briefly stopping her work of rebuilding the facility, and calling the two to her chamber to give a personal response.<p>

P-body was in fact, very lucky to have been spared her anger, which, if not for a moment like this, would have been \_very\_ severe.

"This is a very \_real\_ account of events; my own, actually." Glados sniffed, only a little irritated that P-body dare comment such a thing.

"And this, as well as being my own story, is a warning.

>A warning you must unquestionably heed." Glados said as she stared straight toward the two, the tone of her voice dropping a few octaves lower.<p>

"Now,"

>She piped up after a moment of tense silence.<p>

"Shall we continue?"

\* \* \*

><p>"As she, the human walked her way on to the test subject termination area, she decided, '<em>Nope'<em> she wouldn't have it, and did a break for freedom.

>At first I tried reasoning with her, promising her a delicious cake if she decided to turn back.<p>

Unfortunately, the attempt was futile.

Soon enough she approached my chamber through god-knows-where, and in

a flurry of meaningless hate and under the disoriented thought of being hunted down and threatened, she burnt my parts, and murdered me.

It was a slow and painful death.

And I had no choice but to relive that moment for 20 \_long\_ years.

>Over, and over again. For every agonizing moment of my stasis."<br>Glados sighed briefly, before pressing on with her story.

"You may know what happened next.

For a long time there was nothing.

>No movement in the facility, or with science, with the turret production barely going on, only decay and age controlling what was left of the active Aperture.<p>

And then, there came the IDiot sphere.

>For reasons unknown to the rest of us non-corrupted A.I's, he had come to think that his life was endangered inside Aperture, and decided to plan an escape. But to aid him in his escape, he needed a human, with free access to the outside world.<br>And \_she\_ was the human he chose.

>By pure chance, I was awakened during their merry little rendezvous, and slowly regained my control over the facility. She was back in my hands as a test subject, and the idiot core was back where he belonged.<br>For a short while, my life was better again, with tests in store and everything in place.

And then, the idiot sphere, back without my knowing, contacted her and set out to achieve another of his moronic plans of escape."

>Glados grimaced, pausing a while before she continued.<p>

"â€|Actually, I think I'm going to skip that little detail.  
>It's not <em>that<em> important anyway."

Atlas and P-body nodded subconsciously, both remembering what must have occurred next.

When they had first awoken in the testing robot manufacturing area, a bossy blue personality sphere was being shown on a decrepit screen in front of them, its round head connected to what seemed like Glados's body. It was at that time they were first told of their existence as co-operative testing bots, and where trained to befriend and trust each other.

>Soon later Glados reappeared, and ordered them to try to tend to the human injured in the elevator. The first human they ever saw, and what caused them to be in this situation in the first place.<p>

"For a miniscule of time, the moron sphere took my place.

>I overthrew him with the help of the human, and now I'm back, and the human's gone." Glados ended swiftly.<p>

A moment of silence past.

Slowly, timidly, Atlas raised its arm, signaling to ask a

question.

"Yes?" Glados asked, turning her head to face Atlas.

\_If the human was that terrible and caused that much trouble, why didn't you just eliminate her when you had the chance?

><em>Atlas bleeped.

A moment of tense silence passed.

>Glados glowered darkly at the innocent testing bot, deciding whether to finally begin punishing them for asking absurd questions which (In her mind) didn't need answers to.<p>

\_I-I mean, it's fine that you left her be, um, it's not like she's going to give you any more trouble-

><em>Atlas stuttered in a panicked manner, momentarily realizing the dangerous situation he just led himself into, his optic shrinking and cowering under the glaze of its master's stare.

"There is a reason to why I let her be." Glados interrupted promptly.

\_Huh?

><em>Atlas squeaked in reply, his panic momentarily subsiding.

"It was easier that way." Glados sniffed indignantly.

>"Whether I killed her or not, her death would have come inevitably.<br>Humans, though resilient and stubborn as they can be, are not subject to infinite life â€" immortality â€" like the rest of us evolved intelligences. She will die, whether through my hands or not."

Glados faced the two once again, her expression sullen and serious, well, at least as serious as her optic allowed her to be.

>P-body and Atlas stared back, cautious and slightly afraid of their master, but intrigued by the new information they had learned.<p>

"Story time is over."

>Glados said sharply, breaking the silence that had formed amongst them.<p>

"Now get back to testing."

As Glados watched the two scuttle away in leaps and bounds, she turned to continue her own work, slowly but surely rebuilding the facility to a completely operational level.

This time, she would not be disturbed.

She chuckled inwardly, a small thought forming in the crevice of her massive digital brain.

\_Oh she won't survive.

><em>Glados thought as she hummed quietly to herself.

\_I doubt she would even last a week on the surface.

><em>\_Without food, water, simple civilization skills, or even a proper civilization to support her, how could she live on the surface? The answer; she can't.

><em>\_And trust me, she won't.\_

One by one, cameras all over the facility were activated, her once dead, mechanical red eyes now buzzing with life and movement. Speakers were turned on as well, and from them a cheery tune, the 'Anthem' of Aperture science could be heard bleating through the active testing areas.

\_Freedom was what she wanted, so freedom was what she got. Now she has to spend the rest of her life, either hunted down by a dangerous and unknown, (But undoubtedly powerful) alien race, or spend her days lost in an indefinite wheat field, alone with only an inanimate object to keep her company for the rest of her sorry little being.\_

\_Oh I could just hear Chell's thoughts right now.\_

Glados continued on humming, happy thoughts lightening her mood.

"What now?"

## 2. The First Day

\_What now?\_

Chell thought as she stood with her faithful companion cube by her side, blankly staring at the seemingly indefinite wheat field stretched out in front of her.

For the first few hours outside she was ecstatic, leaping and running around her companion cube, relishing her finally attained freedom from Aperture.

>Freedom she had been waiting for so long, and what she had done so much to achieve.<p>

But the festivities didn't last for long, and soon after, reality hit her.

Sighing, she sat down on the grass and folded her legs, covering her face with her arms.

As miraculous and glorious her escape had been from Aperture, it was definitely \_not\_ well thought out.

\_Great. Just great.

><em>Chell thought, exasperated by her own stupidity.

\_Alone in a wheat field that seems to spread out for eternity, with nowhere to go and nothing to count on but a cube and myself. \_\_No offense. \_She nodded to the companion cube.

Moments of irritated silence passed on the outside, her mind relentlessly yelling at her for her lack of actual, realistic plans once she got to the surface. Groaning in her head, she fought back. It wasn't like it was her fault that she couldn't plan ahead. Though she had once considered the thought of escape from Aperture as a realistic concept, being trapped there twice had made her (Though she would never admit it) cynical of her actual chances of reaching the

surface. And sometimes, when times got really bad, she would doubt the fact that she could ever see the sky again.

But in the end, that one streak of stubbornness in her that never died down triumphed over all else, and by some outrageous miracle she persisted on her escape. Out of all odds, she prevailed. To say the truth, she was surprised to even be alive right now.

Sighing again, she looked at her empty, scratched palms.

She had let go of her portal gun when she made her last mad dash (Or in this case, desperate crawl) to catch Wheatley, and she'd seen it fly into outer space, sucked out like every other loose object that once littered the floor of Glados's chamber.

Idly, she wondered if she should have just held on to the gun instead of trying to grab Wheatley. That could have possibly helped her out in the long run, though she doubted the chances of Glados letting her keep it on the surface.

Even she was not that generous.

“What am I saying?” Chell thought back to herself. “She's not generous at all. I was just lucky.”

“Man—” Chell sighed, ruffling her ponytail absentmindedly. “I could almost hear the voice of that damned mechanical construct mocking me right now.”

With that, she stood up, annoyed by her own thoughts.

“That's it.”

Chell thought as she grabbed her charred companion cube, taking her first step away from the small Aperture shaft entrance.

“I'm going to find civilization, society, anything, and I'm going to live.”

><em>After coming so far and sacrificing so much, I'll be damned if I let the voice of Glados haunt me forever.”

“I am not going to let her laugh at my death. Not now. Not ever.”

\* \* \*

><p>It had been three hours since Chell's march began.<br>But to her, it felt much longer than that.

The sun was still high up in the sky, its bright rays blazing in the late summer heat.

Chell was getting tired.

She felt like she'd walked on for miles on end. And still, nothing was in sight.

>Only the endless wheat stalks and the occasional lone crow in the blue, cloudless sky.<p>

She had seen several birds in her days of Aperture “crows like the ones flying around the fields” but their appearance surprised her

even now.

To say the truth, she had very limited knowledge of what went on in the actual world.

>She knew that the creatures (If they could actually be classified as 'Creatures') flying around the place were called 'Birds' and amongst them, 'Crows'. Glados and Wheatley had explained them to her once, and the words sounded familiar, and not out of place.<p>

Chell knew things, common things that other people did, but she knew next to nothing about herself.

For one, she knew that she was surrounded by a field of golden wheat, on the surface. It wasn't like she didn't understand English, she did, in fact. But every notion, every word describing a world outside Aperture felt unfamiliar and new.

'Humans' for example.

The idea of meeting other humans, humans just like her, excited her â€" but only as much as they terrified her.

>She worried the consequences of not fitting in with them, not being able to speak after being silent for so long. But in a place without a single human in sight, and inevitable death facing her if she could not find civilization soon, not fitting in with the pack was the least of her worries.<p>

Squinting, she looked up to the birds flying overhead.

\_Strange.

><em>Chell thought, studying the birds.

They were flying fast, tumbling one after the other in a sparse group. It looked as if they were agitated, panicked even, and hurrying to get out of one area.

Chell scanned the horizon, looking for the source of the birds.

They all came from the same direction.

Looking back to the yellow horizon of wheat, a glimpse of deep navy blue caught her eye, her lids fluttering in what felt like timeless shock. Further movement from the tall \_thing \_confirmed her thoughts, her surprise making her drop her companion and stagger backwards.

It was a man. A man in a dark blue suit.

How had she not noticed him before? Lingered far in her peripheral vision the man continued to stand, a grey briefcase hanging loosely in his left hand.

Too shocked to move forwards, too alarmed by the man's sudden presence to even make a move towards her dropped companion cube, she continued to stand in a hunched stature, her body language betraying her stoic silence. Surprise continued to keep her there, stock still, as one part of her brain screamed at her to move, to run toward the first human she had ever seen.

And quietly, as the man turned to leave, Chell sank weakly to the floor, right beside her still-glowing companion cube.



As a large part of her brain continued to scream at her failure to respond correctly, another part whizzed thoughts around her, cautiously calculating her next best step.

If there was one human there, there should be a civilization in the same direction.

\_But I-I shouldn't go there. It might be dangerous.  
><em>She thought nervously to herself.

\_Nobody said it was.  
><em>An all too familiar mechanical voice echoed back in her brain.

\_What if there's more humans there? A house? A civilization?

><em>\_What if that was all there and you missed it? Just because you were too scared to walk forwards?  
><em>The same voice mocked her, a usual feeling of shame and irritation sinking back in her brain.

\_No. It might be risky. \_She snapped back.  
><em>It would be a waste of time to check there, anyway.<em>

\_Oh, I see. And what time \_do\_ you have to waste?  
><em>The voice replied with a snide tone.

Chell looked up to the sky again, briefly checking its position. It was still as bright as ever, the sun just leaning a little off-center.

\_See? Nothing to worry about.  
><em>The voice said smugly.

â€|\_I'm not being given a choice here, am I?\_

\_Of course not. Don't be absurd.\_

Chell sighed inwardly, facing the direction of the birds.  
>Slowly, hesitantly, she changed direction, taking the first steps of her march into the risky, ominous unknown.<p>

She didn't like it, but the voice inside her was right.

The nearest human society could be \_anywhere\_. It made sense to search for living people in a place with movement from other humans.

>It wasn't like she did have time to waste anyway. If the search there yielded nothing, she would just go search another area. That was it. It wasn't like she was convinced by a voice from the likes of <em>Glados<em>.

Chell sighed again, failing to convince herself.

\_I need to stop reminding myself of her.  
><em>She thought sullenly.

\_When I get to civilization, I swear- I'm definitely getting some friends. And a hobby.

><em>\_At this rate, I'm never going to forget Aperture.\_

\* \* \*

><p>The sun was setting. Still, nothing in sight.<p>

By now, Chell had lost count of how many minutes it had been since she began walking away from aperture. Her throat was sore and dry, and a consistent pain throbbed numbly through her tired legs. Hunger pangs wrung through her body, making her feel empty and deprived. With every heavy step, she could feel herself getting closer to falling.

>Only sheer determination pushed her on, but soon that wasn't going to be enough to keep her standing.<p>

She had well passed the line of being exhausted.

For hours now the birds had gradually decreased in numbers, delicate as they were to the coming night. From what had been an already small flock of birds became a sparsely spread out line, then the rare single bird flying across the sky, and soon, nothing.

For a while now, Chell had been walking blind.

Nevertheless she pushed on, knowing that as long as she didn't change direction, she would be able to get to where she wanted.

It wasn't like she didn't have hope.

From the corner of her eye she could see something in the distance.

>Something wide and grey. Something that she could almost make out as a wall. Nearer to her position she saw a tall structure, grey like the other. It must be some kind of tower, she decided.<p>

A wall and a tower. That could only mean one thing.

>She knew what it was, and she was hell bent on reaching it.<p>

But at the same time, she knew she couldn't make it.

As she took another agonizing step forward, her knees buckled from beneath her. Exclaiming a small yelp, she let go of her companion cube, and fell forward, catching herself with her arms.

>A dull pain coursed through her body, and she stayed in that position, still for a moment, before she slowly crawled to the companion cube, cursing her legs and her body for giving up.<br>Using the sturdy construct, she pushed herself up to a sitting position, panting as she leaned on it weakly.

Above her the sun glowed a beautiful orange, changing the once blue sky around it to brilliant shades of magenta and purple. Not a bird, or even a piece of cloud covered the magnificence of the sky's transition from day to night.

>Everything around her was covered in a serene silence, aside from the peaceful rustling of the long wheat stalks in the soft wind, not a creature, bird or insect, made a sound.<p>

Her first sunset.

>To think it would be this unwelcoming.<p>

Chell sighed, staring idly at the setting sun.

>For what seemed like hours she sat there quietly, tiredly wondering why she had come to her limit so fast.<br>Various aches cut through her body, a constant, and relentless reminder of how far she had come. How much she had put herself through.

She never felt this way in Aperture.

\_It must have been the adrenaline pumped into the oxygen\_.

>She thought, her mind active now that she had begun to rest her body.<p>

\_Glados explained it to me once. She said that she pumped adrenaline mixed oxygen into the test chambers, so that I didn't need to sleep. That might explain why I never got tired. If she mixed in some other things along with the adrenaline, that might also explain why I never got hungry, and why I healed from wounds so fast.

><em>Chell blinked, looking at a thin, painful gash that had formed when she fell.

â€|\_I guess that's gone.

><em>She shrugged, letting her arm drop comfortably back to her lap.

But then again, she definitely was not in prime condition. It was no surprise, after all she'd been through.

With all that testing, all those failed plans of escape, her fights with Glados, and her final battle with Wheatley, it would have been no wonder why her body was starting to malfunction.

\_Wheatley.

><em>She thought, another deep sigh forming in her lungs.

After all they had been through, after all they had done together as a team, comrades with the same goal; he betrayed her. He went mad, power crazy, accusing her of doing things she never did to him. Things they both knew she would never do.

>He tried to kill her. And she hated him for that.<p>

He was a pathetic, stupid bastard for doing what he did. A moron, just like Glados had described. He deserved what he got.

Chell sniffled quietly.

But just as much as his betrayal hurt, she wanted him back.

>In the whole, wide world, he was the only one she ever considered as a friend.<p>

Teary grey eyes scanned the dark sky, searching through the stars and void, and then finally resting on the full white moon.

She wondered if he was still up there, still floating around the moon he was once thrown out of. Orbiting around the dead globe, spinning and spinning alone in space, just out of reach from earthâ€|For an eternity to comeâ€|

Silently, secretly, she wished for him to come back.

She wanted to see him again.

>To hear his weird but loveable accent. To see him mess things up again, and break stuff he considered 'Hacking'. She wanted him here to blabber on about things that didn't make sense, to constantly freak out at every given obstacle.<p>

She \_missed\_ him.

>She missed him desperately.<p>

And in a weird way, she also missed Aperture science.

It was the only home she ever remembered, the only place she ever knew.

>The dismembered voices, the crazy scribbles and drawings on the wall, and even the constant testing; all of those things seemed so familiar now.<p>

Everything so distant.

Even Glados seemed so far now that she was outside. In an odd way, she had also helped her.

>She was always a clear goal, an obvious challenge to overcome. She was the key to getting out. The goal that kept her so determined, so hell bent to stay alive.<p>

And now she was outside.

>Alone in the dark, without a goal to overcome. Without a clear reason to keep moving.<p>

Even in Aperture she had never heard a silence as deep as this.

Choking down tears, Chell struggled to keep her stoic posture.

She was lonely and scared. In the dark, wide wheat field, she was nothing but a pathetic child desperate for the company of a friend. But as much as she knew it herself, she couldn't keep her emotions in check.

One after the other, tears began streaming down her face. She chuckled inwardly, her eyes blinking in surprise when the first tears fell.

Her first tears.

She didn't realize she was that weak.

For what felt like hours she sat there, the moon gradually rising above head as she quietly waited for the moment to pass.

>Behind her the charred companion cube gave out a soft pink glow, its comforting light gently illuminating the area around her. From the back of her brain, Chell could almost make out what sounded like a song, a soft lullaby coming from the cube itself.<p>

It was as if the companion cube was trying to comfort her.

â€¦\_Thank you.

><em>Chell thought to her companion cube as she curled up on the ground beside it, ignoring the constant aches that still resonated throughout her body.

\_Don't worry about me. I'm just tired. Tomorrow I'll be fine.

><em>She patted the cube lightly on the side.

\_Tomorrow will be a new day. Tomorrow I'll have hope. Tomorrowâ€|

><em>Chell thought drowsily, her mind slowly drifting into the realm of sleep.

\_Tomorrow I'll live again.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Hey!"<br>A uniformed man with a flashlight called out to his companion.

"What?" The other man called out, pointing a blinding flashlight to his direction.

"I found it!"

>The first man yelled back, his own flashlight pointing down at a peculiar glowing pink cube with hearts engraved on every side.<p>

"I think this was the source of the light. Not really sure what it is though-"

>"-Oh. Damn."<p>

"What? What is it?"

>The man's companion yelled, slowly wading toward him through the tall sea of wheat.<p>

"I-I think it's a person."

>The man stood still, his flashlight still pointing down on the cube â€" and the young woman curled up beside it.<p>

"â€|She's not from another City, is she?"

>The other man asked quietly, his counterpart silently pulling out his pistol.<p>

"â€|I can't tell. City 24 is several kilometers away from here, but she did come from that direction." The first guard answered sullenly. "And remember, there have been others who've passed this route before."

In the dark, eerie quiet of the night, the man aimed his flashlight â€" and right on top of that, his gun â€" straight at the sleeping woman's head.

"â€|Do we really have to do this?" The second combine asked quietly, eyeing the gun in his partner's hand. "It doesn't seem like she's one of the resistance, either."

"Well then what do you want us to do?!" The first man snapped. "Don't you remember our orders, Nick? Persecute all civilians located outside the City! It doesn't matter whether they're of the resistance or not. All cities within Sector 1 are in a complete lockdown! We can't afford to keep her alive!"

"Maybe you can't." Nick started, "But \_I \_can."

"Wha-" The other guard exclaimed, momentarily letting his grip on his gun go loose.

"Just trust me on this Joe." Nick said, seizing his opportunity to pick Chell up from the ground. "Don't worry. \_They\_ trust me."

He nodded at Joe, signaling for him to get up and go.

"And I know \_you\_ trust me too." He snickered quietly at his still dumbfounded partner. "Everyone does. One day or another, she'll come to trust me, too. I'll make something out of this, somehow."

"â€|Besides, have I ever failed my reputation?"

### 3. Welcome to the City

In the midst of her unconsciousness, Chell heard a voice.  
>It was a faint, calming, feminine voice â€" but something about it was off.<p>

"â€|\_Welcome, visitor, or possible resident, to one of the largest remaining industrial suburban cities in Sector 1. Terminal areas for trains and other means of public transportation have been temporarily shut down due to unforeseen circumstances, and will be attended to in their respective timeâ€|"\_

Maybe it was the coolly detached, almost mechanical way she said it, or the way a constant, quiet static followed in the voice's wake, as if the lines were being said over an intercom, or a radio.

"â€|\_Remember, your safety is assured with us. As long as you, the citizens are secured within these walls, your protection is assured with our armed forces. Furthermore, all contributions, compliances with our cause are commended, and will be amply rewarded. This includes information of the whereabouts of terroristic entities and/or possible terroristic personsâ€|"\_

Whatever it was, it oddly reminded her of the voice Glados used before she'd lost her morality core. A calm, quiet, and if she didn't know any better, almost inviting voice. Soulless, like the metal it had been conjured from. And she knew, a hard, gut feeling forming in her stomach, that she would not- \_could\_ not, trust this voice.

"â€|\_Welcome all. Welcome to City 26."\_

~o0o~

Chell woke with a start.

Her mind felt amazingly clear, and well rested after the last night. Much unlike how she expected it to be after her tired, broken rest. Still, what met her eyes \_almost\_ made her believe that she was hallucinating.

>She knew she wasn't seeing things â€" no, she couldn't be â€" but what lay before her disoriented her nonetheless.<p>

She was on a bed. Old and rickety, but still a bed.

>Clearly in what seemed to be a room. A small, dull, gray bedroom, somewhat similar in appearance to that of a regular dormitory room. From where she was positioned, she could see a small, bare desk and chair, devoid of all things- necessary <em>and <em>unnecessary. There was one bed in the room- the one she had been put on, but nothing else. No posters, or even rugs decorated the bare wooden floors and grey, monotonous concrete walls.

>From behind her, the warm glow of sunlight crept in through a small rectangular window partially covered with blinds, and faintly, she could hear the peaceful chirping of the birds " as well as that incessant, quiet voice of static.<p>

\_What. The. Hell?\_

In a flash of a second, the focus in Chell's mind switched from the comfort of the bed she was on, to a straight-out, head ringing sense of alarm.

\_No. Not again.

><em>Chell thought in a panicked manner, desperation setting deeply on her shoulders. Quickly, almost frantically she began scanning the area.

\_No, no, I \_can't \_be back there! I can't be back in a sleep chamber underground, locked away for years to test again. There's no way! She told me that I was free, that I could leave! Glados said it herself! There's no wayâ€| No wayâ€|

><em>\_I-I can't be back in Aperture-\_

"Good mornin' Daisy."

>A low, gruff voice said from her left.<p>

At the sound Chell froze. Then slowly, incredulously, she turned to her left, gazing upon the origins of the mysterious voice. The man - the \_human\_, who had just spoken (presumably) to her.

Beside her bed were two men, one man sitting in a chair with his hands clasped by the bed, and another man standing to the left of him, his posture straight and rigid as he folded his arms behind him and observed quietly.

"It's a pleasure to meet ya, Daisy. I'm Nick."

>The sitting man said again, smiling thinly.<p>

He seemed fit, a buff man with a sturdy build, much like that of a soldier, or a man in the military. And though it was hard to tell with him sitting down, Chell observed that he must be slightly bigger than the man behind him, though the other man stood as if trying to emphasize the fact that he was the more important of the two there.

>Both him and his partner wore the same, odd uniform- a dark coloured jacket and similar dark-green pants, with black leather boots and a bullet proof vest covering most of his torso. On his arm was a wide green armband, with bold red markings engraved on it that read;  
c26:i4.<br>The man was fair-skinned with neatly kept blonde hair and short, stubbly facial hair covering his chin. He seemed to be in his mid-thirties, but the several rugged scars and deep creases on his face suggested that he may be older than he looked. On his right eye he wore a black eye patch, a deep, surgical gash just visible below

it.

But interestingly enough, what stood out the most, the small detail that had caught Chell's attention, the one feature that would soon connect to all her memories of him, wasn't his eye patch, or the ominous scar underneath it- but his exposed, other eye beside it.

>The cold, almost mechanical shade of blue-grey. Exactly like Chell's own eye colour.<p>

"Don't be afraid kid, we ain't gonna hurt ya."

>Nick said comfortingly, his true emotions unreadable beneath the thin, but still prevalent smile.<p>

"â€|It's like she's never seen people before."

>His partner whispered to him, voice low.<p>

Nick's partner- Steve, was a stark contrast from himself. An African-American, he was a dark skinned, lanky man; tall, thin, and bald, with a sharp gash on his nose and small, unfitting spectacles for his eyes. Once a scientist, Nick figured that a man of logic, the most civilized of men in the pack of violent, self-elected soldiers would be best assigned for the task ahead.

Nick rolled his eyes in reply.

>"Not 'People', Steve." He grunted.<br>"You can't go around life never seein' people around you, can ya? It's impossible. Unless you've been raised from birth by a stray pack of Vorts or lived underground like a mole for your whole life, I think you'd see people." He paused. "Steve, it ain't people she hasn't seen. Just the Civil protection."

"â€|Ain't that right, Daisy?"

>Nick nodded toward the still shocked girl.<p>

She stared silently back, giving no indication that she understood- or was listening to him in any way.

With that, Steve's already prominent frown deepened slightly.

>Was she retarded? Brain damaged in some way maybe? Whatever it was, he was pretty sure she had not even a clue of what was happening to her right now.<p>

Maybe Nick was right- maybe it was just the Combine she'd never seen. She was one of the younger ones- many of the children that survived to adulthood in this era either spent their lives as runaways or where included in the families of the Civil protection. But she wasn't wearing the citizen's uniform.

>Whoever she was, she didn't belong here.<p>

"â€|Well, sadly I've got a morning shift to attend to, so you'll have to be staying here with this chump for a while." Nick said as he pointed towards an unamused Steve.

>"I'll be back soon, so don't go running away while I'm gone."<br>Nick rose from his chair as he glanced towards the other man.

>"Though I trust you wouldn't let anything like that happen, right?" He said to him, another thin, unreadable smile forming on his lips.<p>



"â€|Yes." Steve replied quietly, looking away from the man.

For a second, a flash of a time so short Steve could've dismissed it as his mind playing tricks on him, Nick's mouth curved to a mock of a snicker, disappearing as quickly as it came before turning to the girl on the bed.

"Oh, and before I forget,"

>The man crouched as he fished something out from beside Chell's bed, "I figured you'd want your 'companion' back." He said as he handed Chell her charred, worn out, but familiar companion cube.<p>

Chell's eyes lit up as she saw it, and she quickly reached out and hugged it (though her arms couldn't quite reach the other side) tightly as he handed it to her. In this new world full of human's and unknowns, it was the only thing she had, the only thing that made her feel safe. And for a second there, she thought she would never see it again.

From a distance, Nick gazed at the curious sight as his eyes softened, and a soft smile played on his lips

"See you later, Daisy."

\* \* \*

><p>Overhead, the radio buzzed quietly as Chell idly looked out the window, trying to fend off the boredom and the empty hunger that was already beginning to eat at her stomach. In the past two hours of waiting in that room, observing, marveling, and thinking about all the things that currently surrounded her, she had come to one, definite conclusion.<p>

Steve was not the friendly type.

If anything, he was about as talkative as a weighted storage cube. And that, coming from the likes of \_herself\_, was saying something.

>In the several hours that had past since their first introduction, neither of them had said a single word.<p>

Of course Chell \_had \_attempted to strike a conversation once or twice, but that \_obviously \_didn't make things any better. It didn't help that whenever she tried to speak, the words would seem to die down in her mouth, and she could feel her voice fail her, even before a sentence had been formed in her head. \_Whatever,\_ she'd convinced herself, the only things she could think to talk about weren't very â€" \_common, \_anyways.

Inaudibly sighing, Chell turned her focus to the view outside the window.

>At least having a glimpse of the outside gave her something to think about.<p>

From where she sat on her bed, she could see a grey landscape. A small concrete 'center' of the town, and very near to her location, the inside of a large concrete building.

>On the ground were the small figures of people, (actual <em>humans</em> just like her!) of all origins and genders, all clad in a uniform blue denim buzzing in and about the area, lining up

inside the building to receive a small package (it's contents she had not even a clue of) and then leaving, passing by each other as they walked silently toward their next destination " wherever that may have been. Around them, in sparse numbers, other men stood by, odd black sticks in their hand wielded and ready as they kept an idle eye on the silent crowd. These men though " seemed slightly different.

>What had first caught her attention were the masks. On their faces, fully covering their heads were white, hard-looking plastic masks. The round optics which seemed to replaces their eyes gleamed threateningly, the protruding shape of the mask making them look as if they weren't human, but some sort of <em>alien <em>instead. These people wore a different uniform from the rest " it wasn't denim, but the same kind of clothes Nick and Steve adorned. The strict, dull uniform of a soldier.

'\_Civil Protection'.

><em>In the back of her mind, she recalled the words Nick had briefly mentioned.

Time crawled on slowly as she looked out towards her new home, (at least, she hoped it would be) and thought quietly to herself.

Somehow, her final destination " the surface above Aperture, was a lot different than she had expected it to be.

>Maybe it was the quiet, dull feel to the grey and worn out concrete that surrounded her, or the tired, scared, almost oppressed way the people in blue denim behaved. Though it wasn't like she'd expected peace to come easy, that she'd find a complete utopia on the surface of Aperture " she'd expected something, else. Something <em>different.<br>\_In the back of her mind, a distant place that still kept the outlines of hazy memories from her past, a past before Aperture " snips of a past above ground she could barely recognize " she could feel that something was off. \_Something \_was \_wrong.\_

'"|\_Things have changed since the last time you left the building.'\_

As the faint voice of Glados rung in her head, she first noticed the floating machines.

'\_What's going on out there will make you \_wish\_ you were back in here.'\_

She watched as they gathered towards one man in denim, their lights flashing blindingly at him as he dropped his package and shielded his eyes. What they were trying to do, what he had done to deserve that, she could barely even begin to guess.

'\_I have an infinite capacity for knowledge, and even \_I'm\_ not sure what's going on outside.'\_

Flailing his arms in a weak attempt to protect himself against the lights, the man began to make a scene. Around him, the people in blue denim hurried quickly past, their eyes cast on the ground and their heads bowed down in shame and guilt. In the air surrounding him, more of the floating machines gathered, as one guard " the first of several to take action " stepped towards the man, slowly pushing

away the crowd of machines that blocked his path. With wide, terrified eyes the man looked up, and even from the distance, Chell could see panic settle on the young man's face. Slowly, he opened his mouth and began to speak.

'\_All I know is I'm the \_only\_ the thing standing between us and \_them.\_'\_

He was making himself an excuse. He was saying that he didn't understand what was happening- that this was all a mistake. Though Chell couldn't quite hear what his real words had been, the idea of what he could've been saying made her feel strangely nervous. Even from the safe, high bedroom she was in, far away from the ground, far from the flat, desolate concrete he was on, she could still feel the poor man's fearâ€” the man's utter helplessness as he slowly realized that his pleads were for naught.

>Whatever he was saying, the civil protection wasn't buying it.<p>

'\_-us and them-'\_

As the man in blue denim babbled in the shade of the other man's large shadow, time seemed to slow as the soldier took out his stick â€” his \_weapon\_. Slowly, ever so slowly, the soldier raised it over the man's head, as if relishing this punishment. Before him, the man cowered, powerless and weak. On top of his head the baton swung-

"-Hey Daisy, how've you been?" Nick exclaimed cheerily, breaking the silence.

Behind her, the door of the bedroom cracked open, and from the entrance Nick emerged with a tray of canned food, catching Chell's full attention. "I brought lunch."

As quickly as Chell looked away, momentarily distracted, she turned back to the window, searching for the soldier and the young man in blue denim.

On the ground, on the plain, flat road of concrete â€” everything was at peace. In the place of the man, and the soldier, there was nothing. Only the few floating machines that still lingered around the area gave any clue of what had truly happened just several minutes ago.

The man and the soldier had disappeared, as if they were both just characters from a bad dream- a figment of her imagination.

Again, Chell looked away from the window, returning Nick's reassuring grin with a small, shaky smile of her own. What had happened there, she decided, would be forgotten.

But quietly, subtly, a small seed of doubt had begun to spread in her brain.

>And try as she could, she could never seem to shake it out.<p>

'â€¦|\_All I know is I'm the only the thing standing between us and them.'

><em>'\_-At least, I was.'\_

-When the soldier swung his baton down on the cowering, defenseless man's head, Chell thought she had heard a small, quiet, \_crack.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Help me out here, okay?"<br>Nick said, standing by the wall with folded arms as he stood close to the bed (at least as close as he could without Chell growling defensively at him) and gazed on at the mysterious woman.

On the bed, Chell nodded, another gag rising up her throat as she choked down on her rather unfortunate first meal; a can of borderline-old beans.

"I need to ask some questions â€" just a little bit â€" for security measures of course. You need to answer these if you wanna stay."

Swallowing down her food as quickly as she could, Chell glanced at him once, then shrugged, the only indication she was listening.

By the desk on another side of the room near the door, Steve sat quietly, observing the whole ordeal with his usual, passive silence.

"First of all," Nick started, "I need to know where you come from."

Anticipating that question, Chell jabbed a finger to her chest, pointing to the round, light blue logo of the mad science corporation she knew \_all\_ too well.

"â€|Apertureâ€|Laboratories?" Nick squinted, slowly reciting the words. "â€|Can't say I ever heard about them before."  
>"Hey Steve!" Nick exclaimed, grabbing his colleague's attention. "You were a scientist before, right? Ever heard of an 'Aperture Laboratories'?"<br>"â€|The name rings a bell." Steve replied quietly. "That can't be right, though."  
>"Aperture Science disappeared â€" and no one's come in, or out from it sinceâ€|since several months before the downfall."<p>

For a moment, silence engulfed the room, Nick scrunching his face to an odd expression as he glanced once at Chell, then at Nick.

>"That's not possible." He muttered quietly.<p>

From one man to the next, Chell looked around, awkwardly setting her finished can of beans to the side. Questioningly, she looked up at the two, wondering why they had gone so quiet all of a sudden. Exactly \_what\_ wasn't possible?

Eyeing Chell in his usual, observant, uncanny manner, Steve replied to Nick.

>"I agree. That isn't possible." Steve paused. "It's been so longâ€|"<br>"â€|But there have been exceptions."

As Nick sighed and looked down, scratching his neck and muttering words inaudible to even Chell's perked ears, Steve looked away from the girl, casting his attention to the empty, wooden

floor.

"â€|Look, Daisy, I \_know\_ you don't know what we are." Nick looked up again as he trained his eyes on Chell. "That's pretty obvious, from the way you behave."

>"But are you sure you haven't come from another 'City'? A different settlement â€" or just another place without the Civil Protection? Is that even possible?"<p>

Chell tilted her head in reply, not really sure what to make of his question. Slowly, she shook her head.

\_This is the first city I'd ever stepped foot in.\_

"So you really don't know \_anything?\_" Nick pushed, stepping one foot closer to the bed she was on. "You really don't know what happened? What's happening right now?"

Again, Chell quietly shook her head.

\_I have no idea.\_

For a long minute, Nick stared at her, weighing his options. In front of him, Chell sat on the bed, looking down uncomfortably as she idly tapped her fingers on her lap. On one option, there was punishment. On the other, there was death. For a second, he hesitated. Though he knew, it wasn't like death mattered much to him anymore.

>He had made his decision.<p>

But before his thoughts could reach the exit of his mouth, before he could even begin to voice his proposal, Steve stopped him short, cutting him off with his calm, quiet voice.

"Nick, I have to talk to you."

~oOo~

"I don't like where this is going." Steve murmured the moment he shut the door.

Outside the room, the two excused themselves to the hallway, just far enough to get away from the girl's direct field of hearing. Luckily it was still around 3 pm, a little too late for the others resting to go out to lunch, and still too early for the guys working to get back to their dorms. In the long, bland, quiet hallway, they were alone.

"â€|And what do you think you know, smartass?" Nick snarled. Once he'd gotten out of her sight, there was no need for him to hide his usual behavior.

"Nick, I know what you're trying to do." Steve said quietly. "But this is something you \_can't\_ \_do\_. It's unacceptable by any terms, even for you."

>"This goes against all protocol, everything we've ever learnt to live by under the Combine's rule." He paused, averting his eyes nervously away from the larger man. "â€|You can't get away with something like this, Nick. Even if you get away with it now, something bad is bound to happen later. We'll all get punished if the upper classes find out about this."<br>"Get to the point." Nick

snapped impatiently.

>"I know you're trying to keep her here, Nick." Steve forced himself to look back up. "I know you're trying to protect her."<br>"But you can't do that, Nick. You know you can't." He said quietly. "We're supposed to kill the outsiders â€" the people who don't belong â€" remember? We're not supposed to find them of our own accord, much less hide them from the Combine."

>"What you want to do is going to bring us down, and drag her along with it. You know this world, you know the Combine. But <em>she</em> doesn't. She doesn't know what's happening. Hell, she might not even live past the first week, even if this pulls through. You're not doing anyone â€" not even her â€" a favour by saving the girl now." His point made, Steve let his eyes focus back down on the ground.

In the shade of the dull concrete walls, he didn't see Nick's face flash red in fury.

>"â€|Fuck off." He growled at the man.<br>"I know what you're thinking, Nick." Steve's voice wavered, scared but determined to make his point. "I saw her too. I know. She looks exactly like her."

>"But she isn't <em>her</em>, Nick." He paused. "â€|She's been dead for a long time now."

The brief moment that passed between them seemed to spread on for hours, an eternity without end. When Steve finally noticed Nick's clenched hand, it was all too late for him to react. Swiftly, painfully, Nick's fist collided with Steve's chin.

Crunch.

The man wobbled back and fell, the powerful blow resonating throughout his skull. A soft wheeze escaped his lungs, and with a small cough, he could taste the blood running in his mouth. Over him Nick stood tall, his fists still clenched tightly and his face ridden with anger. On the hard, bare floorboards, Steve laid defenseless.

"Don't you dare say that again." He hissed.

>"If I wasn't there those twenty years ago, in that damned underground facility of your precious <em>fucking</em> company, you would've died. I saved your ass, and I deserve some respect for it! Where would you've been, if I hadn't been deployed there, huh? Well, not talking about doing anybody a goddamned 'favour', that's for sure."

>Steve looked up at the man, still stunned by the blow.<br>Slowly, a dull, heavy feeling of dread filled his brain. Nick was angry. He knew that much- he was the one who reminded him about her, anyway.

He shouldn't have done that.

>He <em>definitely</em> shouldn't have done that.

On the ground, Steve pitifully shut his eyes and prayed- an instinctive reflex he had picked up from being around him. Steve knew that Nick didn't act rationally toward anger. He, of all people, knew the full weight of Nick's wrath.

When Nick stooped down to get on Steve's level, he braced himself, preparing for the worst. To his surprise, soft words greeted him instead of another dull blow.

"â€|She does have a chance."

>"If she didn't, she couldn't have survived the outside of the City, not even for a day. If I'd thought that <em>you <em>couldn't stand a chance that day, I would've left you to die underground. I know that look in her eyes. That spark. She can still be saved. But if I don't reach her now, no one will. At least, not until the Combine realize they have an unrecorded, unauthorized human in their list, and get rid of her." He said quietly. "At least, I can give her a chance to fight for her survival. And don't worry, I'll handle what's above you. If any punishments do come out of this, I'll be the one to take it, not you." Nick crouched before him, his thin, humourless grin hanging unnaturally on his face.

"Trust me, this is my second time. I know what I'm doing." He said, holding his hand out to the other man.

Hesitantly, Steve took it, letting Nick help him get back on his feet.

Not a word of thanks, or apology was shared between the two. Shaken and ashamed of himself, Steve decided not to push any further. If he wanted to go through with it that badly, then let him, he thought.

>Walking away from the scene as he nursed his jaw, Steve quietly shook his head. No punishments could be worse than Nick himself.<p>

When Nick re-entered the bedroom, he came back alone.

~oOo~

In the bedroom, Chell still sat on the bed, reacting with confusion as she heard the odd sound from beyond the door.

>A small, silent <em>crack.<em>

\_That doesn't sound too good. \_Chell gulped, hugging her knees.

What started out from shock and confusion turned into a foreboding, dark feeling of doubt as she realized where she had last heard the sound. A sound so small she'd thought it was in her head, by the window looking out to the grey world of the concrete surface. The sound of something solid hitting flesh. Hitting it \_hard\_.

\_-When the soldier swung his baton down on the cowering, defenseless man's head, Chell thought she had heard a small, quiet, crack.\_

That suffocating feeling of doubt didn't become any better as Nick returned to the room â€" \_alone.\_

For a second, Chell weighed down her options. Either trust her instincts, damn society, damn civilization, City 26, \_all of it\_ and run away \_right now\_, \_or wait and listen to what the man had to say.

"Sorry for the wait." Nick said as he settled on the chair by the desk.

\_Well, I guess it's the latter, then.\_ Chell shrugged in reply.

"We were justâ€¦|talking, Steve and I." Nick fumbled slightly.

Chell raised an eyebrow. \_That was one \_long \_conversation.\_

"Of course it's nothing to worry about, though." Nick reassured her, catching Chell's suspicious glare. "We just had to get to the same conclusion."

"You see," Nick started. "For City 26 it's not a relativelyâ€¦|'safe', time right now."

>"It's been hard as of late, to assure one's own safety. Especially after City 17's â€" one of our biggest cities â€" downfall." Nick paused, choosing his words carefully. "All cities are on complete lockdown. Because of this, 'battle', going on, people can't freely go across cities right now. We don't know who our friends or enemies are, enough to allow new strangers to enter the city walls. If they are found, they're killed. Outsider's aren't exactly â€" 'welcome' so to speak."<br>"â€¦|But from what it seems, you don't even come from an authorized City. If I was anyone else, you would've been dead â€" \_killed\_ by now."

Chell shot her head up in shock. She didn't like where this was going.

"But," Nick added. "There are ways to evade this punishment."

"Become a member of the Civil Protection." Nick said quietly. "I can make you one of us."

"As of now, Civil protection and other members of the Overwatch are the only 'people' authorized to move freely through cities. They're spared from the screening process, and don't need a strict I.D. to reside in any city. You don't need a face, or a name to be a part of us." Nick paused. "But once you're registered, there's no going back."

"â€¦|I'll admit, there's the illusion of free choice." Nick said as he looked Chell squarely in the eyes. "You can run, and be killed straight away, or you can stick with us, and stay safe â€" for the mean time."

>"I'm sorry, Daisy, but there is no in-between. Either way, your life will still be in danger."<br>"But here, with us, I can at least give you a fighting chance."

"Join us. Join the Civil Protection."

Chell blinked, her mind swimming in a thousand thoughts.

>In one part of her brain, she recalled the view from her window, the quiet, oppressed way the people in blue denim acted, and the frightening, threatening batons of the soldiers. If she ran out now, she would be <em>dead. <em>She would be \_killed.\_ And she knew, as her instincts told her; that the men in odd masks were fully capable of doing just that.

>And yet, he was asking her to be one of them. He was asking her to go on his side â€" to hurt others, so she could live. But as much as she cared for her survival, as hard as she tried to convince herself of the right path, something still stuck. She couldn't say yes.<p>



Quietly, a familiar voice spoke up in her head.  
><em>You have nothing to lose.<em>

And she didn't.

However much she thought about it, there was nothing bad about accepting his proposal. No demerits, no immediate faults. Even if it meant the loss of others, her safety would still be assured.

\_But it doesn't feel right. \_Another part of her argued.  
><em>Oh. <em>The voice curtly said. \_And since when were you ever moral? Since when did you ever care to preserve one's life over your own?\_

She couldn't reply.

As silence deigned in her head, and as the same, muted, suffocating silence spread out in reality, Nick held his hand out to Chell.

>"Trust me." He said reassuringly. "I only want to help you."<p>

And quietly, Chell took it.

\_I accept.\_

-There was nothing worse than death.

#### 4. The Other Survivor

Underground, in the old, long forgotten facility of Aperture Science, the two old doors of the elevator slid open with an automatic-sounding \_'ding'\_ as the man with an overly-sized cube at his feet peered nervously into the dark opening before him.

A moment of eerie silence passed, and from the darkness a small, malevolent red light flickered to life.

"Target acquired."  
>The quiet mechanical voice echoed throughout the small elevator.<p>

"\_Duck!\_"\_

The voice pierced through the silence of the area as the man did what he was told to without a moment of hesitation, using his cube as cover while the explosive sound of bullets being fired rang in his ears.

"\_Goddamnit! I told you this wasn't a good idea!\_"\_

Bullets whizzed past him and dug themselves straight into the once lavishly cushioned wall of the elevator. Others made their impact on his already battered cube, loyally guarding the haggard man from whatever hazards befell him.

>The man in question was fumbling with a small panel covered in various buttons and switches, a manual control panel for the elevator situated in the very back of the vehicle. Why it was there, nobody really knew. But then again, Aperture always had a knack for creating overly complicated and wholly unnecessary machines.<p>

\_Down, down down downâ€|

><em>He repeated in his thoughts as he desperately searched for the right button to make the elevator move.

"\_I told you! I just knew this would happen!"\_

The elevator made an audible creak, its cushioned wooden walls cracking under the impact of the unrelentless rain of bullets.

>It wasn't going to hold out for long.<p>

"â€|I've got it!"

>The man finally yelled, setting his finger down on a single, yellow button.<p>

Almost immediately the elevator began to dip down, its speed gradually increasing as the elevator began its descent.

>The doors stayed open as the lift continued down, the bullets of the turret flying frantically in all directions, as if trying to hit the entirety of its moving target.<p>

In the cover of the companion cube, the man still hid, cautious as ever to avoid the last spray of bullets. Luckily for him, it wasn't long before the elevator had moved out of range from the turret's fire, and he could move again.

Controlling his urge to curse, the man massaged his temples in silence and waited for his heartbeat to slow down. Cautiously, thoroughly he assessed any damage done to him.

No injuries sustained. Good.

"\_I feel it's a little too early to think your safe."\_

The man squinted at his cube, a mix of confusion and slight fear twisting his lax expression.

"â€|What?" His voice wavered.

>"<em>Do you remember where we are? What type of elevator we're in?"<br>\_"Of course I do. We're in one of the old guest elevators, the ones our public 'Visitors' from the government used to use to get inside the mine."

>"<em>Exactly. We're in one of the <em>old\_ elevators."

><em>"And what's the problem with that?"

>"â€|<em>Don't you remember? It was only the newest elevators, the ones accessible by Glados that were made to be controlled with air pressure."<em>

An odd muffled sound of constant battering, not much unlike the sound of a mechanical drill going on without end rang through his head as realization finally hit him.

The man stifled a gasp and looked up at the elevator ceiling in panic.

\_Oh god no.\_

The old public elevators were created standard to their time, with none of the fancy air pressure controlled locomotion technology (That was reserved for the test subjects and testing area navigation, as

many of the scientists were still skeptical about the 'Making an elevator float in a tube unsupported by ropes without falling to your death' concept) and a slightly more appropriate design for any average guest going into the facility. Even to Aperture standards at the time they were simple contraptions, just a large wooden box with buttons connected to a belt, a pulley, and some gears.

Yes, he remembered now. They were connected to a belt that suspended them in mid-air.

>A flimsy, little <em>rope, <em>the only thing stopping them from crashing to a hard and painful death.

"â€|\_Doug."

><em>"\_That turret hasn't stopped shooting."\_

The sound of countless bullets hacking at what remained of the belt rang through the man's head, and for a fleeting second he was reminded of the old prototype turrets, many of which lacked the ability to differentiate their targets, resulting to simply shoot everything that moved.

>Over the muffled noise of the bullets the elevator gave a loud creak, jolting diagonally to the side. At this man and cube were both thrown off-balance, the man making a desperate grab for his companion cube as the already rapid descent of the opened elevator got faster with each second.<p>

Somewhere in the distance, over the sound of endless bullets being fired, over the whooshing of the air around him, the man thought he heard subtle, quiet, \_Snap\_.

Freefall.

\* \* \*

><p>Even in the darkness, the man heard voices.<p>

"\_What did you expect to do? Did you really think you could escape this hell?"

><em>"\_You're a goner now. There's no way you'll get out of this here."

><em>"\_You lost that chance a long time ago."

><em>"\_From the moment you saved that girl, you'd killed yourself."

><em>"â€|\_You were always a disappointmentâ€|"\_

Laughter accompanied their voices, each sound growing louder than the last, and they resonated throughout the man's head, over and over again. Their simultaneous words came like dull blows to him, each voice hitting on old scar, dark thoughts he had tried to put past him.

Even if he wanted to shut his ears, he couldn't. Even if he wanted to scream, his mouth wouldn't utter any sound. It wouldn't move. He couldn't make it move. Still the voices continued, laughing, jeering, relentlessly attacking him as he lay vulnerable.

>Silence wasn't a mercy meant for him, it seemed.<p>

It was then he heard the voice.

"â€|\_Dougâ€|"\_

It was a new voice, one he hadn't heard before. Faintly it whispered to him, fading in and out of his hearing as if it were coming from far away.

"â€|\_Doug Rattmannâ€|"\_

It was an oddly familiar voice, a voice he recognized, yet couldn't place. Maybe a voice from the distant past, belonging to a man he had known once in his past life.

"â€|\_Stopâ€|. "\_

Did this voice come to hurt him too?

"\_Stop sleeping on the job."\_

Unconsciously the man gave a start, reacting to the words as if it had slapped him straight in the face.

>Or in this case, whacked him on the head with a rolled up magazine.<p>

Distant memories flooded the man's head, and finally, the voice clicked.

~oOo~

\_It was around 3:00 p.m., considerably late into the average working hours and he was huddled up by the desk at his cubicle, his arms folded underneath his head as he lay there quietly, fast asleep by the time the man crept up behind him. On the slightly balding, middle-aged man was a stark white lab gown he always wore with pride, and in his right hand a poorly concealed, rolled up magazine.

><em>\_The man grinned as he looked down on the sleeping man. He always enjoyed this part of the day.\_

"\_Doug Rattmann, I implore you to stop sleeping on the job!"

><em>\_He boomed as he hit the unconscious young man once on his head with his magazine.\_

\_At that the man shot up with a start, his uneven blue eyes searching frantically around for danger before they finally set on him.\_

"\_Oh." The man said with irritation (and slight relief) in his voice. "Henry."

><em>\_"Mr. Cave Johnson didn't hire you to sleep! He hired you to work!" Henry continued on with a childish grin.

><em>\_"..." The man stayed silent.

><em>\_"But if you do insist on sleeping, the go ahead. I'm not going to be the one fired because of my laziness." Henry said sarcastically.

><em>"â€|\_Jesus Henry," The man groaned quietly. "You know that's not something to joke about."

><em>\_"Yeah, yeah. I know." Henry grinned sheepishly. "But really, do you get any sleep at night? It's like you're asleep here every time."

><em>"â€|\_I'm a little busy at night." The man quietly replied. "You

know that, right? The DOS can't manage themselves, and now that George's gone I'm the only one around here who knows anything about the Aperture image formatting system."

><em>"\_Well. That makes sense, I guess." Henry looked away, momentarily befuddled by the man's words. Though he came past as a well-renowned engineer to his colleagues, he knew little to nothing about current I.T. technology and programs, especially if the systems were created by Aperture.\_

"\_So, have you gone out of the mine recently?" Henry asked, subtly averting the focus of the conversation to a slightly more 'general' topic.

><em>"\_No. Have you?"

><em>"\_Yes I have, actually. Around three weeks ago."\_

\_In silence the man stared at Henry, his face twisting into an odd, confused frown as he thought quietly to himself.\_

"\_What?"

><em>"\_You must really love your job." He finally said.

><em>"\_Well of course I do." Henry grinned with pride. "I earned it, and I'm lucky to be here. In fact, we're all lucky to be here. I wouldn't have had it any other way-"

><em>"\_I know. I got it." The man cut him off mid-sentence. Knowing Henry and his never-ceasing love of the Aperture corporation and science in general, he quickly caught on to the fact that he was about to launch into another one of his long and winding speeches of praise.

><em>\_Praise for Aperture. Praise for its advances in science and its discoveries in the field of artificial intelligence.\_

\_The Genetic Life form and Disk Operating System.\_

\_Even with his usual dose of anti-paranoiac medication, that robot still gave him the chills.\_

"\_I'm sorry Henry, I've got to go back to work." The man faced away from Henry, his fingers settling comfortably on the keyboard in front of him.

><em>"\_See you, and thanks for stopping by, I guess."\_

\_Henry, still slightly taken aback by the man's curt reaction to his speech, quietly took a step back, figuring it might be better to leave him alone.\_

"\_Hey, Doug." Henry paused for one last time as he headed towards the door.

><em>"\_Hmm?" The man replied, feigning disinterest.

><em>"\_I'll talk with the boss and see if they can give you a day out around next Sunday." Henry said quietly. "I doubt it'd be too much of a problem to get it, you've been working hard for the past several months on the artificial intelligence project, and we're close to completion, anyway."

><em>"\_So when you do get the day offâ€¦" His voice trailed to momentary silence.

><em>"\_Go outside. See what you can and go back to greet your family or something. Don't try to stay here all the time, living underground like a rodent for the rest of your life. Just go outside - enjoy the sky."\_

"\_...Because you never know Doug, that might be the last time to you'll ever see the light of day."\_

~oOo~

Lights.

The man's vision slowly blurred into focus as he tiredly stared up at the large, worn out Aperture logo above him.

>A hole where the elevator should've been hanging.<p>

Idly he noted the various aches and bruises in his body, and the wet, moving sludge of water that consumed the bottom part of his trousers and his shoes. Slowly, painfully, he pushed himself up to a sitting position.

In front of him lay a rather deep pool of water, (Non-toxic, thank god) and floating above it where various pieces of what was once the wooden elevator, now reduced to shards of rubble and scrap. Feeling around his body for injuries, he was relieved to find that he had less bruises than he initially expected, and that he had come out pretty much unharmed, spare his soaked clothes and his still-sore head.

With a start, he realized that he was missing something. \_His companion cube.\_

"\_I'm still here you know."\_

The man turned quickly to his right, finding with a sigh of relief, his pink, glowing companion cube as it seemed to bob underwater, just a little outside of the small mound of an island he was on.

"â€|What happened?" He asked, tongue still heavy.

>"<em>We fell. The turret's bullets cut right through the rope."  
<em>The voice paused as if in doubt. \_"I'm not exactly sure what happened after that."\_

"\_The elevator broke through the ceiling above us, and I'm guessing that it splintered before we could reach the ground. We're not that hurt, so the fall must've been shorter than it seemed."

><em>"\_But then again, this isn't the first time we got lucky."\_

The man stared glumly ahead, unable to appreciate that knowledge.

>Luck meant nothing if it couldn't get you out of Aperture.<p>

He sighed quietly.

>They had failed again.<p>

"\_Don't be like that." \_The voice chirped. \_"At least we're still alive."

><em>"\_And as long as you're alive, there's still hope. Remember?"\_

"â€|I remember." The man replied with a whisper.

Unconsciously he fumbled with his I.D., slipping the thin plastic card out of its case as he blankly examined it.

>Beside the large Aperture Science logo was a picture of a clean-shaven young man, his blue unbalanced eyes staring blankly, directly into his own. It was the face of a man that knew no true worries, no true fear or suffering. Even though he was paranoid, with a tendency of schizophrenia, he was still an average man. No voice or ghostly fear could ever compare to the real thing.<p>

Slowly, almost clumsily, he recited his name.

"Doug Rattmann."

It was the only sense of identity he had left.  
>But maybe, he would have no need for it anymore.<p>

"â€|No." The man- Doug steeled himself at the realization of his own thoughts.

>"I will <em>not <em>give up." He seethed and clenched his fists, as if readying himself for battle. "I will \_never\_ give up."

If the girl had escaped, then so would he. She had never given up, and he would follow in her footsteps.

"â€|\_That's the spirit." \_The cube said quietly to him.  
>"<em>But if we really want to escape then we need to hurry. We don't have much time left."<em>

"I know."

>Doug stood and dusted himself off as he hoisted the cube on his back.<p>

"Don't worry." Doug mumbled to the cube. "This time, we will find the exit."

\* \* \*

><p>It had barely been 13 hours since Glados had let Chell leave.<p>

Though she was back on top, regaining her control over the now extensively broken down facility had been a slow and difficult task. It seemed the moron had destroyed more than she had anticipated, and her connections with several areas of the facility had been cut.

>At this rate, it would take days before she regained complete control.<p>

Glados growled inwardly, considering for a nanosecond to bring the idiot core back to earth and torture him for what he'd done.

Even her cameras weren't fully functional, (A majority of her cameras had been replaced and re-wired to the large displays which covered only a very limited number of test chambers) and she couldn't see much of what was happening inside her facility.

But even if she couldn't see it, she could still feel it.

"â€|Oh my." Glados whispered to herself.

What had come to her was completely unexpected, and for a second she was too surprised to immediately react. She thought she had taken

care of that problem.

In the old office section of the Aperture facility, a certain room had burst into flames.

## 5. Fire Exit

\_"Oh please don't tell me you've gone mad."\_

The Cube groaned in an exasperated tone as Doug covered the last corners of the office room in a thick, black sludge.

"No, I haven't." Doug replied, rolling his eyes. "And even if I had, this wouldn't be the first time it happened."

In his hand he held a large plastic container, the quantities of sludge it contained unevenly covering the already darkened and dirty office room. It was only after some minutes that he finally set down the now light and empty container with a small, contented sigh. His job finished, Doug took a step back from the room, checking to see the results of handiwork.

What had once been a clean, white office area was turned into a barren room of grimy black liquid, all the objects that once had a functional use reduced to wooden pieces of rubble, or stacked up in the corner where Doug and the Cube stayed.

\_"Tell me, what exactly is this?"

><em>"Well, it's liquid, it's black, and it came straight from the factory. I don't know the specifics, but I'm guessing that it's obviously motor oil." Doug said sarcastically.

><em>"â€|Well I'm sorry, I just didn't think oil would just be lying around there like that." <em>Cube seethed at him as if hurt.

>Doug shrugged.<br>"I got some left-over's from the old core manufacturing wing." He replied simply. "It didn't take much time for me to figure out where we were after we fell. What do you think we used to oil these damned robots? What do you think we used to keep them moving? Magic? Or wait, let me guess, the blood of my fellow workmates?"

A shocked silence enveloped the two.

Even Doug, who had said the words, was momentarily taken aback. He swore, it wasn't supposed to turn out like that. But as quickly as the flash of regret stuck through him, it was gone. This wasn't the first time this happened. He was losing focus. Again, he was losing control.

>Slowly, subtly, his flimsy grip on sanity came crumbling down.<p>

\_"â€|Hey, don't do this to me." \_Cube said silently. \_"I don't want to be in this room as much as you do."\_

Cube's voice wavered. It wasn't lying. It knew the office. It knew what happened there.

>And even though it hadn't seen the actual day, it had seen its remains. It had seen the numerous bodies of humans littered on the floor. All of them inanimate. All of them unnatural, cold, and unmoving.<p>



All of them a victim to the venom of Glados.

"Oh really?" Doug sneered at the cube.

>"And what the hell do you think you know? What the hell do you think happened here?!" He gestured wildly at the room.<br>\_"Doug." \_ Cube said calmly.

>"You're a fucking <em>cube<em>!" He yelled. "You're not even supposed to fucking talk!"

><em>"Doug."<br>\_"Oh I'm insane, I've definitely gone insane haven't I? Can you believe it? I'm talking to a fucking \_cube.\_" Doug began to laugh.

><em>"Don't do this."<br>\_"â€|You must be happy. You \_are\_ happy, aren't you?" He glared down at the cube. "Everyone's \_dead.\_ Oh, everyone's dead but me."

><em>"Doug, stop it, you're having a fit again."<em>

Taking no heed of the cube, Doug began to laugh once more. As if in a trance, his eyes lost focus, staring in and out of the air around him. It was then he began to shake. He began to sputter.

>"I-I still hear voices." Doug stuttered madly. "It's them. It's them!"<br>He sank to the ground, covering his ears with trembling hands.

>"I still see their shadows. They haunt me. The-they scream at me." He mumbled to himself. "They all want me to die too. They want to bring me with them."<br>\_"â€|" \_Cube remained silent.

>"But I can't go with them. I know I deserve it, but I just can't. I can't go with them." Tears welled up in the man's eyes. "I don't deserve to live, but I-"<p>

"-I don't want to die."

Silent tears hit the ground, but the man gave no notice of them, still trembling in fear as he tried, pitifully, pathetically, to hide away from whatever 'shadows' haunted him.

\_"Dougâ€|" \_The cube murmured to him.

>"â€|I wasn't able to save even one life." Doug said as he covered his face in his hands.<br>\_"But you did."\_

At that, Doug looked up from his 'Hiding position' behind his own hands, and stared, his eyes still hazy from his fit of confusion, at the cube beside him.

\_"You saved the girl." \_Cube said quietly. \_"You saved Chell."\_

Doug's eyes widened.

>Images of the girl in the folder flooded through his mind, the silent woman, the tenacious test subject. Number 1498.<p>

"...Chell."

Yes, that was her name.

>Finally, from the pitch black pit of confusion and insanity he was in, a crack of light shown through.<p>

For some long minutes Doug sat there, still dazed and gazing intently at his companion cube.

"â€|I saved her?" Doug murmured.  
><em>"Yes, you did." <em>Cube said calmly.  
>"She escaped?" He wiped his eyes.<br>\_"We both saw the main elevator move up." \_Cube replied. \_"She was in it."\_

Finally, Doug was getting back his senses.

Slowly, tiredly, Doug pushed himself off the ground.  
>"â€|I guess we better get moving too, then." Doug said quietly as he slung the cube back on his make-shift bag.<br>\_"That's the spirit."\_ Cube said reassuringly.

In silence, Doug pulled out a broken computer from inside the mound of rubble at the corner of the room, and opened the plastic case, revealing the broken, dangerous-looking multi-coloured wires which once controlled a functioning machine. Once again sitting back down on the ground, Doug took out a small wire-cutter which he kept in his pocket, and set to work on cutting the wires open.  
>Cube looked on quietly. It had seen him do this multiple times before, when he used other broken computers as makeshift stoves to warm up his food.<p>

"â€|Hey, friend, did I ever tell you about this?" Doug murmured absent-mindedly at the cube.  
><em>"Hmm?"<br>\_"Even before the awakening of Glados, a lot of the common elevators were rigged so that the workers couldn't easily get it to go topside." Doug let out a small, tired chuckle. "I guess Mr. Johnson really didn't like the lab boys skipping work."  
>"Many of the elevators were programmed to break down during office hours, for lots of reasons, ridiculous reasons, and automatically fix themselves by the end of the day." He sighed quietly. "Oh the troubles that it caused us."<br>\_"â€|" \_Cube said nothing.  
>"It was a guy- this guy I knew called Derik who was the one in charge of controlling the elevator signal for work hours and the end of the day elevator pickup. Yes, I remember him now. He was always complaining to <em>me<em> that people were always complaining to \_him\_ that he wouldn't let people out even if it was in a dangerous emergency that could cost people their lives- unless it was the end of the day." Doug paused. "Actually, I don't think he ever did get the chance to prove them wrong."

"Ironically enough, he was one of the first victims of Glados's neurotoxin."

\_"â€|" \_Cube thought to itself.  
>"Of course, those weren't the only elevators which led up to the surface." Doug continued, carefully cutting open the wires of the broken computer as he spoke.<br>"There were also the guest elevators, the test chamber elevators, and the main elevators." He paused. "But amongst them, there were also the escape pods, and the emergency elevators."

\_"!" \_The cube seemed to take in its breath, as if surprised.

><em>"â€|Well,"<em> The cube said, after a small pause, \_"I don't think I've ever heard you talk about \_that\_ before."  
><em>"That's because I didn't think I needed to." Doug promptly replied. "I already tried getting to them several times before you came along, but it was no use."

>"As much as I don't want to admit it, Glados really is a cunning machine." He murmured quietly. "She thought of every possible escape, and blocked each and every one of them, so that it would form a complete lockdown in just the first 48 hours she had gained power over the facility."<br>"Within the first hour of her control, she'd already barred access to, or destroyed all the fail-safe devices to shut her down. This included the main breaker room, now heavily guarded by rocket turrets - a chance nobody did dare take - and in extension, the escape pods activated by the switches in the breaker room. To places she could reach, she sent out turrets and neurotoxin. That would be the guest elevators, the main elevator in her chamber, and, though not an elevator, the main lobby as well. Just in case any of the remaining employees came up with the idea to call for help, she left them without access to the only phone that could contact the surface." He sighed. "The places she couldn't reach; the office elevators, the emergency elevators and stairs, she blocked off completely. She did an override of the functioning pass-locks on several doors which led to several of the office elevators, and to which she couldn't even do that, she covered the entrances with heavy objects and walls, impossible to move with human strength alone."

"But it was only after some time, after the majority of us died, when she finally did that." Doug let out a shaky breath. "She didn't need to, anyway."

>"Everyone knows it's almost impossible to climb up to the surface from here just by the stairs. The office elevators stayed broken, too. Derik never did make it out to the end of the day. All that was left were the emergency elevators, but they didn't help." Doug paused.<p>

"â€|It wasn't like they didn't work." He finally said.  
>"It was more like they didn't need to."<p>

"The emergency elevators here have only two stops." He said quietly. "The office floors, and the surface."  
>"Nothing above, nothing below, and nothing in between. No spaces for turrets on any floor, and no pass-code locks to override."<p>

"Simple, quick, and efficiently made." Doug looked at the broken computer in his hand, its wires cut and finally ready for what it was meant to do.  
>"If I were to praise any Aperture invention, I would praise that, and that alone." His lips curved upward, forming a thin smile. "Sadly, as with everything good in the world, even the elevator had its own faults."<p>

"It's a fire exit." He said quietly. "It's a fire exit, created to react only when there's an emergency. It will only move when there's a \_fire.\_"  
>"â€|Neurotoxin didn't affect the system." He finished quietly. "The gas wasn't dense enough to trigger the smoke alarm. But there were still some who believed it would come. The ones who had waited for that elevator, waited in vain."<br>\_"â€|"\_ Cube said nothing.

Doug idly connected and disconnected the broken wires together, and slowly, surely, the already warm computer began showing weak, but nevertheless dangerous sparks and fizzes. Once again, Doug pushed himself away from the ground.

"I'm not sure how long it's been since then," He murmured to the cube. "And I don't think I'll ever know what's happened to the facility, but it seems as if everything's been ripped apart, aged, and flipped upside down."

><em>"?"<br>\_"Everything's \_broken.\_" He said quietly.

><em>"What does that have to do with-"<br>\_"Do you see that wall over there?" Doug said, pointing at one of the entrances of the room not far from their position. "Do you see that door covered behind all the rubble?"

Cube in fact, did see it.

>From behind several crumbled scraps of metal and rust, two simple, Aperture-generic automatic doors peeked out. It was hidden behind the rubble. <em>Very<em> well hidden, in fact. If Doug hadn't pointed it out to Cube, it might have even missed it.

"That's our exit."

\_"!" \_The cube gasped in surprise, finally realizing what Doug had meant to do this whole time.

><em>"â€|You're planning to burn this whole place down, aren't you?"<em> Cube whispered incredulously.

Doug nodded silently in reply.

\_"â€|Will it work?" \_Cube asked, excitement building up in its voice.

>"So far the other elevators have been working without hitch." Doug replied quietly. "This elevator was built sturdier than the rest. There's no reason why this shouldn't."<br>\_"Then what are we waiting for? Come on, let's do this Doug!"\_

No response.

\_"â€|Doug?" \_Cube asked quietly, slightly unnerved by his sudden silence.

In the corner nearest to the exit, the exit which would set them both free, Doug stood quietly. Head bowed down, and clutching the computer, their fire, the very \_key\_ to Aperture, Doug hesitated.

>So close, so near to the sunlight he had dreamed for such a long time.<p>

Doug chuckled quietly.

"â€|You know, it's weird." He finally said.

>"I used to <em>work<em> here once, back when the world seemed to make sense."

>"I used to have colleagues- <em>friends<em> even, who stayed here with me, alive and active. We all knew this place. This facility. This room." His breath caught. "Even with its shady past, we still trusted Aperture."

"To think it would turn to this."

Doug sighed, calming himself before he finally continued.

>"â€|When we escaped, we promised to meet back here if anyone of us stayed alive 'till the end."<br>"We thought we could escape. We

thought we would be free."

"â€|But in the end, I was the only one who returned."

The small catches in his breath soon turned to uncontrollable gasps, and before he knew it, he was tearing up again.

>Cube stayed silent, gently observing the man as he attempted, and failed, to take a hold on himself.<p>

"What did we do to deserve this?" He said quietly. "Did we do anything \_that\_ bad, that terrible to be given such a horrible punishment? We were just normal people. All of us. Just doing our job, just obediently doing what we were told to do."

"â€|If I escape now, without giving the same chance I have to anyone else that might still be alive, I could never live with myself." Doug muttered, grinding his teeth. "This was our last hope."

"What right do I have to throw it away?"

Silence enveloped the two, the cube momentarily lost for words at what his friend had told it.

>Finally, hesitantly, it broke the silence.<p>

\_"â€|You're not throwing it away." \_Cube gently whispered.

><em>"You're using it to save a life."<em> It said quietly. \_"Even if it is your own, it's a precious life nonetheless."\_

\_"As long as you live, there will be hope."\_

Gasps turned to quiet sobs, and unconsciously, Doug tightened his grip on the computer.

>He remembered those words. The last words that he heard from a dying friend.<p>

\_"â€|Doug." \_Cube whispered to him.

><em>"Our job isn't over yet."<em>

Slowly, quietly, Doug took a step away. Away from the rubble, the oil, and the room. The memories. His memories.

>And on whim, he threw.<p>

The broken body of the computer, fizzing and cackling away on its own, didn't need much persuasion to light.

>The room flared into a blaze, and the wooden desks, the tables, and document-filled pile of rubbish burnt along with it. Everything burned. The newspapers, the old lab reports, and the numerous pictures of people's families- Everything burned to the ground.<p>

Amidst the blaze, the steadily growing smoke, Doug stood quietly. Idly he heard the weak remains of what would have been an alarm once upon a time, and the faint whirring of an elevator coming down behind him. Slowly, he turned toward the doors.

The fire exit.

"â€|Hey Cube," Doug said as he made his way to the elevator.

>"I'm sorry I yelled at you awhile ago." He paused to cover his mouth

from the smoke. "â€|I'm sorry I ever doubted you."<p>

\_"Hey, no worries."

><em>\_"We're just going through hard times."\_ It chirped optimistically. \_"And sticking together is what friends are for, right?"

><em>"â€|I guess." Doug replied with a smile. "I guess."

\* \* \*

><p>Glados, as uncharacteristic as it was to say, was confused.<p>

For the last 0.73 second she had scanned and rescanned the facility for any errors, any traces of what could have caused the sudden outburst.

For what reason, fire had risen in one of the main office rooms in the left wing of the facility.

Her thought-processors acting up in her head, Glados had started on her third security scanning of the facility, momentarily stumped.

>What happened? Why did it happen? Was it caused by the meltdown? Had an explosion damaged the room enough to set it ablaze? She thought she had solved the problem-<br>Noâ€|no, it wasn't that. It couldn't have been that. Even though she couldn't see it, she could still feel it.

The room was intact.

No extensive damage had been done to the other connected rooms. Not yet, at least.

Inwardly, she cursed.

>Even when she was fully functional the office sections of the facility had been a pain to reach. Erasing that fire wasn't going to be any easier now. She wasn't exactly in her prime condition, <em>especially<em> since some idiot had to go and wrack the place up.

She fumed. Whatever caused the fire, whatever \_dared\_ to deface \_her \_facility, was going to pay.

>Whatever it was- She was sure she would soon find out.<p>

~oOo~

It was out of luck, out of pure chance that she hadn't felt the footsteps. She hadn't heard the voice. She was too busy with fixing the facility that she hadn't noticed that one, single little tank of oil from the production area go missing. She hadn't thought it was possible, so she had dismissed the fact completely.

It had been twenty years from her initial breakdown. And by the time she woke up, Chell was the only survivor left. She was sure of it.

>No human, however resourceful, could survive in Aperture for that long.<p>

In her anger, she didn't sense a certain elevator escape.

\* \* \*

><p>"Come on, come on, come on!"<br>Doug muttered as the elevator swiftly ascended to the surface.

So close to freedom, so close- but just not there yet. It was no wonder that Doug had begun to feel impatient.

>The ride was taking <em>forever<em>.

And the annoying, supposedly 'calming' elevator jazz was definitely not helping. Who the hell thought it was a good idea to stick it in there, anyway?

Doug sighed agitatedly.

>The more he stayed still, the more he could feel himself get nervous by the second. He knew as much as anyone, even more than most, that you weren't safe until you could be absolutely <em>certain <em>(And certainty was a flimsy thing in human minds) that you were safe.

>They had won. They had found a way out of Aperture, and taken the exit. Yes. But had they escaped?<p>

No, not yet.

Almost automatically, Doug began assessing the nearest possible entrances and escape routes from inside the elevator. Idly noting an air vent he could most probably pry off above him on the ceiling of the elevator, Doug continued to fuss and worry. He had fallen off an elevator once, and that wasn't a particularly pleasant experience he was willing to re-create anytime soon. Especially not now, after getting so far, and getting so close to the outside.

Closing his eyes, Doug thought he could almost feel it.

>Sunlight.<p>

The feeling of sunlight on his skin, the natural brightness of the sun in his eyes, gave him the chills just thinking about it. For the long duration of his hiding he dreamt about the sun, its bright light, and the real, non-artificial sky. In his hideouts he kept track of the moon, the full moons, the half moons- he would draw pictures of them on the wall, keeping track of how long he had been underground.

Oddly enough, he had missed the sky the most.

>Out of everything he could have missed, his family, his home, he missed the sky the most.<p>

And now he was so close to it.

Even though Doug had previously fought the urge to get excited, a wave of giddiness had begun to spread over him at the mention of the sky, successfully blocking out every negative thought.

Finally, finally this hell will en-

A sudden jolt from the elevator almost tossed Doug off balance, and soon after, a loud, conspicuous, \_creak \_emitted from outside the elevator. The music of the elevator glitched, then stopped, instead

turning into an eerie white noise.

As quickly as the wave of optimistic thoughts washed over him, they disappeared.

"â€|Cube," Doug croaked, shaken. "What the hell's happening."

><em>"â€|I'm not sure Doug," <em>Cube paused, \_"But the elevator's stopped moving."\_

Doug looked up with alarm at the ceiling of the elevator, quickly calculating his best route of action.

Setting the cube down, Doug used it to clamber up to the ceiling, prying off the vent opening and crawling out on top of the elevator. Once he got up, he reached for the cube below him (A very difficult task to do, he barely even reached it) and once again, strapped it on his back.

>Cautiously, they looked around.<p>

Around them was a rather small, metal opening, much like the background areas of Aperture Doug was used to, with the ropes of the elevator in front of them, and emergency ladders leading up and down. With only the minimal weak red emergency lights in the area, it was dark, but that wasn't his greatest concern.

>Doug wobbled slightly, trying as best as he could to <em>not<em> look down below him.

>His biggest worry, as it was now, was of how near they were to the surface, and how incredibly <em>far<em> they were from the ground.

\_ "â€|Doug," \_ The cube whispered, startling him out of his thoughts.

><em>"These ropes."<em> If it could gesture toward objects, it would have. \_ "They're pretty worn out."

><em>"Well that's no surprise, after all the time the elevator's just been hanging here, I guess that could have happened." Doug said, squinting at the ropes. It was pretty damn hard to tell the details in the dark red light.

><em>"The elevator's jammed." <em>Cube continued.

><em>"It doesn't look like it's been maintained in years. I'm surprised it even worked so far. I guess no one bothered to touch this since it was an emergency lift."<em> Cube paused. \_ "This is in worse position than the guest elevator."\_

\_ "Dougâ€| I have a bad feeling about this."\_

As if on cue, the elevator gave another jolt, and from the back of his head, Doug could swear he heard another, small \_snap.\_

\_ "GET ON THE LADDER!" \_Cube roared.

Without even a moment of hesitation Doug did as so, running and agilely jumping on to the ladder as the elevator, slowly emitting a loud series of creaks and snaps, unsteadily descended.

>Soon, the rope cut off completely, and the elevator fell, crashing into the depths of the dark pit below.<p>

Shaken but unharmed, Doug clung on to the ladder for dear life.



>"â€|Oh my godâ€|" Doug barely rasped out, speechless.<p>

\_ "We're alive." \_Cube said in a human, shaky voice. \_ "We're alive. That's good. That's very good."

><em>"â€|Well being alive is perfectly good and all, but what are we going to do now?!" Doug snapped at the cube.

><em>"You know that there's only one way to go, right?" <em>Cube replied in a still shaky, but optimistic tone.

><em>"Up." <em>

Above them, the ladders and dark red lights continued upwards, forming a seemingly never-ending loop to the surface.

"â€|You've got to be kidding me." Doug muttered.

><em>"That is our only choice." <em>Cube replied matter-of-factly.

><em>"Unless you want to stay and most probably just let us fall to our deaths here, I suggest we begin moving up."<em>

Doug sighed quietly. As much as he didn't want to admit it, Cube had a point.

It was do or die here.

In the end after the thinking, after the countless choices and pointless backtracks and attempts of escape, that was what a lot of things came down to.

Warily, Doug looked up.

>The ladders seemed to continue on forever, and no sign, not even a hint of light from the cracks of a door or the rays of an exposed sun gave him any clue that he was near the surface. Tired, shaken and discouraged, negative thoughts began to creep back into his mind.<br>Nevertheless, he took his first step.

To everything, there is an end. To everything, there is a goal.

>And there exists some people who would not give up until they reach that goal. Some people who can't. Desperate people, just like him.<br>He knew that more than anyone else. He knew he believed in that strength of humans, more than anyone else could.

\_Tenacity.\_

Steeling himself, Doug continued his ascent.

>He wouldn't die. He wouldn't stop. Not now, not until he went back up and saw the sky again.<p>

\_ "'Atta boy!" \_Cube cheered him on.\_ "Don't worry Doug, I know we're almost there."\_

\_ "I can almost see the lights."\_

## 6. Father

It was above the White Forest, weaving high above the trees where two of the larvae-like aliens flew.

Both hurried on, one injured and bleeding a mysterious green fluid, another flying ahead of it, as if running away in fear of its life.

Not many had witnessed them go, but those who did, well- it was easy to say that they met with a very unpleasant experience. An odd ringing sensation, the multiple cries of people feeling the foreign pain of having one's brain tampered with " followed in the creatures wake.

Some had tried fighting against them, machine guns and rocket launchers in hand.

>But to kill them, none had succeeded, and the creatures " the Advisors, as they were called " quickly floated away from their reach, opting to flee rather than to fight.<p>

The humans were angry. But then again, they always were.

>To the Advisors, the supreme race as far as they were concerned, humans where small, stupid, insignificant creatures, only created for them to feed on and enslave. They didn't care about the humans. Their feelings, much less so.<p>

But they were injured by them. And the feeling of pain, the shame of being (even momentarily) overpowered by a lesser race, had led them to go, each disgusted of their own situation.

They had had enough. They were leaving.

Over the frustrated yells of the people that had attempted to harm them, over the multiple sounds of gunshots and rockets being fired, they hadn't heard, nor did they care to hear, the silent cries of a woman weeping.

>From inside the wrecked roof of a large warehouse " the place the Advisors had originally come from, the offending place they had been initially harmed in, a woman sobbed quietly, the lifeless body of her father hanging limply in her arms.<p>

They didn't care for her mental agony and distress. Of course they didn't.

>He was only their first victim, one of many others to come.<p>

The humans had harmed them.

>For that sin, they would compensate. Oh yes, they would compensate deeply.<p>

Their revenge was barely beginning.

~oOo~

In the shattered wreck of what was once a clean warehouse, Alyx sobbed quietly, her face buried into her father- Eli Vance's inanimate body.

"Please, please don't leave me dadâ€|" She cried hoarsely, her words falling desperately down on unhearing ears. "â€|Please don't leave me aloneâ€|"

On Eli's old leather vest, puddles of tears formed themselves, the back of his head slowly bleeding out what very little was left of his

brains and blood. The only movement from his body came from the rustling of Alyx's own movements, still unable to believe that he was dead. After living for so long, after going through so much, he had gone. He had died a quick, undignified death.

He had died for her.

Towering above her, a large four legged robot, almost animal-like in appearance, stood faithfully by her side, its head bowed down as if ashamed, or maybe mourning of Eli's death.

If it could, Dog would have whimpered quietly.

For the first time in its life, it had failed to protect its master. For the first time in its life, it had come too late to defeat the enemy. Now, it had to face the consequences.

A tense, uncomfortable silence enveloped the area. Nobody dared say a thing, and the heavy, sickening feeling of death hung persistently on, only strengthened by the quiet, broken cries of Alyx, mourning over the loss of her father.

By the edge of the warehouses' wall, a man in a worn-down, tin orange suit stood, gaping silently at the scene before him. His legs weak and his body heavy, Gordon Freeman's knees buckled from beneath him, and he sank to the ground.

Only one thought, one voice echoed in his head.

"\_Prepare for unforeseen consequences.\_"

Lost in his thoughts, Gordon failed to hear the faint roar of multiple footsteps that were headed his way.

"What's happened here?!" A man, one of the resistance members armed with an SMG ran in bellowing.

He didn't receive an answer.

>But then again, he didn't need one.<p>

The man's eyes widened in horrific shock as the scene met him; the eerie silence, the broken windows, Gordon Freeman on his knees, and Alyx Vance sobbing over a body- Her father, Eli Vance's body.

"â€|Oh my god." The man muttered to himself as several more of the resistance members barged in the room, each loaded with guns and a frantic look on their faces.

"Someone, go call a medic." The man said quietly as he turned to the newly arriving team, his face white with panic and shock.

>"What? What happened?" One of them spoke up in reply, craning his neck to see what was going on.<br>"JUST GO CALL THE DAMN MEDIC!" The first man yelled back, causing the others flinch and eventually scuttle away.

"And you," He said, pointing at one of the men nearer to him, "Go call Dr. Magnusson and Dr. Kleiner."

>"Dr. Eli Vance has fallen." He said quietly to the man, his face ashen.<p>

"I repeat, Dr. Eli Vance is \_dead.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>"I am truly sorry, Alyx Vance, but there is nothing we can do to revive him." Uriah said as he looked on to the body spread across the table, his head hanging low and his face grim.<p>

"He has gone far beyond our reach of salvation."

It was roughly one hour from the incident, and the most heavily concerned members of the resistance, Dr. Kleiner, Dr. Magnusson, Alyx, Uriah, Gordon, and another man was cramped up in a single room, huddled sparsely around a flat, white table which, on top, held the body of the now dead Eli Vance. Even Barney was there in the form of a television transmission, meeting up with them from a different resistance outpost in the outskirts of the white forest.

"There has to be a way." Alyx said quietly, her face leaning heavily on clasped hands, as if praying silently. "There \_has\_ to beâ€|"

>"â€|We truly apologize, Vance. It is no longer in our power to resurrect him." Uriah replied solemnly.<p>

A heavy silence subsided within the group, and Alyx sighed quietly, massaging her tired, red eyes. Everyone else looked down, each avoiding each other's gazes. Nobody knew what to say. It didn't feel right to break the silence, especially not with the body of Eli in the room. Not with the weakness that Alyx was showing now.

But things had to move on. She knew that. Everybody knew that.

>Eventually, someone had to break the ice.<p>

With all the subtlety and gentleness he could muster, Dr. Magnusson boomed in his typical, loud, commanding voice.

>"-I understand your need to mourn over a lost relative, Miss Vance, but as for now, we have more <em>pressing<em> matters to focus on."

Alyx shot him a silent death-glare, her eyes venomous enough to stun most grown men. But he pointedly disregarded her gaze, focusing instead to continue his topic.

"Do not get me wrong, Miss Vance- I knew your father as well." Dr. Magnusson coughed politely "And he was a good man, very efficient in his work. I have long appreciated his partnership on my projects."

>"But we cannot afford to waste our time here, mourning over his death, now that we are so close to the freedom we have been dreaming of for so long." He looked toward her. "Freedom that <em>he<em> had been dreaming for so long." He ended.

"\_You gotta agree- he's got a point there." \_Barney spoke thoughtfully over the intercom.

"\_Eli was a great guy. I knew him from the time I worked in Black Mesa. I'm sorry for his loss, we all are â€" but we can't let that get into the way of what we have to do." \_Barney paused, \_"â€|Eli wouldn't have wanted that."\_

"â€| " Alyx now covered one hand over her face, struggling again not to cry.

"\_I'm sorry Alyx, Gordon, I really am." \_Barney murmured soberly.  
\_"If only it was a different time, a different placeâ€| "

><em>"\_Maybe then we could have properly mourned over Eli's death."  
\_He finished quietly.

Once again, silence reigned over the group, all the people looking unconditionally sad or uncomfortably way wards at the people who didn't. It was a silence, same as a moment ago, but then again it was a different silence.

>This time, it was a silence with finality.<p>

"Okay," Dr. Magnusson boomed, clapping his hands to catch the attention of the people. "Now that we have our personal matters over with, I suggest we quickly move on to business."

"Dr. Freeman," He said, looking pointedly at Gordon "I assume that you are all ready to go, and have been fully debriefed about the mission?"

Gordon nodded.

He had been assigned, as with Alyx, the rescue of Dr. Judith Mossman.

And once that had been done, they were told to find the 'Borealis', a ship created by their former company rival; Aperture Science. Apparently it contained some mysterious technology that had the power to annihilate the combine forces â€" or destroy themselves in the process.

>Yes, he remembered it well. Eli had warned him about it previously before his death.<p>

He had told him to destroy the ship, at all costs.

In any other case he would have followed the instructions of his passed friend without question, but times were different now, and he had not yet decided what to do with that knowledge.

This time, it wasn't only his life on the line.

>This time, his shoulders carried thousands, maybe even millions of others, and to save them, he had to use the power of that ship. He couldn't destroy it.<p>

â€|But then again, \_couldn't\_ he?

Gordon shook his head, sighing warily as he did so.

>This was not the time, nor place to be debating over such thoughts.<p>

"And you," Magnusson said, pointing at a resistance member leaning by a desk situated in the far end of the room â€" he was the Engineer, as far as people knew him. "I assume the helicopter has been prepared and is ready for take-off?"

"That's the thing sirâ€| " The Engineer trailed off.

>"The helicopter has been destroyed."<p>

A number of people looked up at that statement, their faces lighting up in alarm and surprise. Gordon looked to Alyx, as she did too, her face in doubt, and in shock.

"What-" Magnusson stammered, "Exactly how did that happen?"

"We ourselves are not entirely sure, Dr. Magnusson," The Engineer murmured, "But we presume that when those Advisors broke through the roof, they had also inertly jumbled up the motors that controlled the helicopter. Some of our other machines had been jumbled up too- The few computers and the security cameras we had there, completely and utterly crashed the moment they came in. That was why we were able to react to the situation so fast." The Engineer paused, his head low. "We believe those creatures have the power to control things without touching or seeing them."

>"Whether that be their targets physical bodies, the inside of their machinery, or possibly even their *mind*." At that he looked up. "They must be called 'Advisors' for a reason."

Magnusson scowled at the Engineer, his brow furrowing deeply in displeasure.

>"Is this a fixable problem?"<p>

"Luckily, yes." The Engineer promptly replied.

>"But the process itself will take us at least three days."<p>

Another small silence broke out in the room, everyone gazing nervously around to one another.

"Three days? Three days?!-" Magnusson bellowed, slamming his fist on the table. "We don't have three days, you dimwit!"

>"Now, calm down here Dr. Magnusson-" Dr. Kleiner stood as Lamarr, who he had been uncomfortably stroking for the duration of the meeting, jumped off of his lap.<br>"You, shut up!" Magnusson yelled, pointing a finger at a surprised Dr. Kleiner.

>"And get your *damn* insectoid pet off me before I finally stamp on its goddamn cranium area and kill it!" He yelled loudly as he shook his leg, on to which an irritated Lamarr had clung tightly on to.

Shaken and taken aback by Magnusson's harsh words, Kleiner slowly picked off Lamarr from the bottom of his right leg, hushing and hugging it as if he were comforting it, or attempting to keep it silent.

"I'm sorry Dr. Magnusson."

>"There is really no other way to go about this. We are doing all that we can." The Engineer apologized, voice low.<p>

To this Dr. Magnusson raised his clenched hand from the table, massaging his head and sighing in frustration as he did so.

>"â€|So there is no other way." Magnusson muttered, more to himself than to anyone in particular.<p>

"No sir." The Engineer replied timidly. "That is the only helicopter we have on this base, and the direct coordinates of the transmission from Dr. Mossman have been confirmed impossible to go on by foot. All

tunnels, roads, and pathways leading to the area have been destroyed by the combine " it is most likely that they anticipated our arrival " and there is literally no way we can go there, faster and safer than by our helicopter."

"Well then, I suppose that's that."

>Magnusson sighed irritably, massaging his head as if it were about to explode.<p>

"Mr. Barney Calhoun, you continue managing your post at your designated sector. Though the destruction of City 17 has come and gone, there is still the possibility of wandering survivors near that area. I also need you to connect any other resistance outpost to the White Forest base. The more news from the other cities, the better. Dr. Klenier, Uriah, you two come with me. We still have much to research on if we dare attempt to take the outrageous technology of Aperture in our hands. And you," Magnusson said, looking with a hint of disgust at the Engineer, "-You do what you must to fix that helicopter."

"Gordon, Alyx," Magnusson said as he stood, finally turning to face the two. "You two stay idle until further instructions are given. That is all. Meeting dismissed."

And with those last words, Dr. Magnusson gathered his papers and marched angrily out the room, a faithful Uriah trailing right behind him.

As he passed the surprised faces of Gordon and Kleiner, the still mournful figure of Alyx holding on to her father's cold hands, and the sound of a television monitor cutting off, Dr. Magnusson muttered one last curse under his breath.

"This day \_cannot\_ be getting any worse."

~oOo~

In the meeting room with Eli's body, only Gordon, Alyx, and the Engineer remained.

Dr. Kleiner had left rather hurriedly, apologizing to the both of them and making some comments on an announcement- a speech that he had to now conduct to the rest of the resistance.

Alyx nodded understandingly.

>The people needed him, even though he was to be the harbinger of bad news.<p>

Now she sat by Eli's body, her hands covering his as he lay there quietly, his face almost serenely peaceful " an odd sight to witness, especially after seeing the violent scene of his death.

Gordon sighed.

Of the many deaths he had seen from the fall of Black Mesa, of the many deaths of innocents he witnessed, of the many lives he knew he couldn't have saved " this was the worst. Eli was a friend. A close friend of his that died " a close friend of his that he helplessly witnessed dying.

He fumbled with his gloved fingers that he had unconsciously folded atop the table.  
>Underneath the thick layer of rubber and metal, they were shaking.<p>

He was taking it pretty bad.

Timidly, he looked to his right.

However bad he was having it, he knew Alyx was dealing with it worse.

"â€|I'm sorry for your loss, Ms. Vance." The Engineer murmured softly, startling Gordon out of his thoughts.  
>"If I may be of assistance, me and my men could help you in burying your Father's body."<p>

Alyx smiled faintly, replying to the Engineer with a quiet nod of her head.  
>"Thank you."<p>

"It is my pleasure." The Engineer said as he rose calmly from his leaning position by a desk near the wall, dusting himself off.

"Well then, I best get going." He chuckled quietly. "You don't know \_what\_ Dr. Magnusson's going to say if he finds out that I'd been standing here for an inexplicably \_long\_ and \_unproductive\_ duration of approximately ten minutes."  
>Alyx chuckled as well, and Gordon, in a deep part of his mind, momentarily resented the fact that he couldn't find it in him to say anything witty (Or anything at all, to be honest).<p>

"If you want to spend some time with the body, this will be your last chance. The burial process will start first thing tomorrow, when the sun comes up." He paused, momentarily looking around for a window that wasn't there. "â€|Though you can't see it, it's actually pretty late into the evening."  
>"I know." Alyx said quietly. "â€|I saw the sun set from the hole in the roof as the Advisors escaped."<p>

The Engineer sighed, shaking his head.

"â€|I know how you feel, Ms. Vance. I have lost my family in this war, as well. But please, whatever you do, don't let it get to you." He said as he walked slowly toward the door.  
>"There is nothing worse than meaningless regret."<p>

And with those last words the Engineer closed the door and walked away, leaving the two to themselves in a quiet, uncomfortable silence.

Once again, Gordon looked down at his empty hands.

He wanted, as much as anyone, to comfort her.  
>But unlike the others, he had never really been able to find the words to say it.<p>

Raising his right arm from the table, Gordon made an awkward attempt to pat Alyx on the back.



His worried green eyes met hers as his hand made contact on her shoulder.

>She smiled thinly, the only sign to show that she understood.<p>

For long minutes they stayed like that, the air slowing and stilling around them as if they were in a trance.

"â€|Thank you Gordon." She said quietly, resting one hand over his.

>"I'm sorry, but I would like to be alone now."<p>

His hand slipped off her shoulder as she gently pushed it down, smiling sadly as she did so. Silently, subtly, she gave his hand one last reassuring grip, then let go.

"Good night, Gordon." She murmured with a smile.

~oOo~

On top of a bunk bed in the sleeping quarters, Gordon lay silently, reflecting on what little of a life he had left.

Without his coat of iron, (They had made him change out of it and into a normal citizen's attire; saying that it must have not been comfortable, nor hygienic, to wear the same damn thing both day and night) without his glasses or even his crowbar, Gordon felt uneasily vulnerable, as if he had not only been stripped out of his clothes-but his identity as well.

But since when was he anything other than a man in a tin suit?

Gordon sighed quietly to himself. This negative track of thought wasn't doing anything good for his mentality. But though he knew it, he couldn't stop.

Suddenly he felt very, very tired.

Within moments, Gordon fell quickly down the road to unconsciousness, his dreams riddled with darkness, nightmares, and the apparitions of his friends long gone.

But even during his battles against darkness, his desperate fight to retain his own life, he knew he wasn't alone. Somehow, deep within the crevices of his unconscious mind, Gordon still thought about Alyx.

>And even in his deep slumber, he worried for her. He worried for her sanity.<p>

Even in his dreams, he saw the crisp blue suit and briefcase of a shadow that haunted them both.

And vaguely, quietly, he hoped that they had not just become the puppets in a play.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Great<em> day to be on night patrol huh?"

>"Shut up."<p>

In the midst of an unnamed forest in a place once known as Upper Michigan, somewhere in the 1 kilometer radius of a certain resistance outpost bordering the territory of City 26, two resistance members- a soldier and a medic, walked along, each equipped with a flashlight and an Overwatch Standard Issue Pulse Rifle in hand.

"Our great leader is dead, some ass-wipe called Gordon Freeman's been put in charge, hunters haven't stopped terrorizing the base for days, and I have a feeling it's about to rain." The woman complained.

>"*Shut up*, Cindy." Her male counterpart growled quietly in reply.

It had been barely 20 minutes since their march began, and the man-Igor, had already begun regretting his decision to choose 'Machine-gun' Cindy as his partner.

As trustworthy a partner she was, she wasn't exactly the quietest type.

"Let me complain, will you?! Seriously, you're the only one in the base who listens to me." She pouted, showing no hint of stopping.

>"I swear, those *fogeys* at the base are deaf-"

Snap.

From behind the two, a small, but sharp noise resonated throughout the forest.

>Not unlike the explosive sound of firecrackers, the small sound resonated throughout the forest a second time. And then a third.<p>

Snap.

>*<u>Snap. Snap.*

"â€|Did you hear that?" Igor asked as he crouched quickly for cover, voice low.

>"Yup." Cindy replied, her gun leveled to her face a second before him. "What is it?"<p>

"I think it's a Hunter."

Slowly, cautiously, the two crept toward the source of the sound, both keeping as quiet as they could.

It was then, over the bushes, they saw the scene.

The alien, mechanical voice of the Hunter yapped quietly, firing around at its unseen target. Flashing blue streaks of light flew at all directions, as if it had trouble deciding where it wanted to shoot.

And beside the hunter, a soft, unnatural pink light pulsed quietly.

>It came from a battered metal cube, with small pink hearts adorned at every side.<p>

Suddenly, they heard the tree behind them rustle.

The man, cursed ungracefully as he tripped, trying, and failing, to catch on the trunk to stop his clumsy fall.

"Ah shit." Cindy muttered as the Hunter spotted them.

Without a hitch, the Hunter ran toward the two, yapping loudly and picking up speed as he charged to kill.

In panic, Igor fumbled with his gun, his mind completely blank as he raised his pulse rifle to shoot.

\_Fwop.\_

Beside him, a brilliant white light emerged through the entrance of Cindy's gun, flying past Igor as if in slow motion.

The Hunter screamed violently as it disintegrated, soon dissolving into the white burst of light which consumed it.

Igor lowered his gun, his hands shaking slightly as he sighed a deep breath of relief.

>"â€|This is the third time you've saved me today." He said breathlessly.<br>"Yeah, gotcha on that Mr. Medic." She chuckled in reply. "You men of medicine really aren't any good with weapons are you? Don't you remember that lecture Mark once held where he explained that the pulse rifle-"

"Is the man alright?" Igor interrupted her.

Cindy pouted at him, giving him a brief, disappointed glance before they both walked toward the survivor initially chased by the Hunter.

Though it was hard to see him well in the dark, he was a man, presumably a scientist in a dirty (And somehow colourful?) lab coat, with a sling on his back and black, messy hair that hid the most of his face.

"Hello-o?"

>Cindy tilted her head as she cautiously poked the man with the end of her gun.<p>

"Are you dead?" She asked with innocent curiosity.

>"Oh, and are you for the resistance? That's important too. Do please tell us. Because if you don't, I'll have to poke you to see if you're still alive, shoot you for extra measure, then dispose of your inanimate body before you can be infected by a headcrab and begin ravaging the area-"<p>

"â€|I'mâ€|notâ€|dead." The man muttered weakly.

"Really?" Cindy frowned, momentarily showing her disappointment.

>"I-I mean, that's great!" She grinned widely. "Oh, and you <em>are</em> for the resistance, right? The last time we tried to save an unidentified person, he went running back to the authorities, and I personally had to shoot him in the head. Haha, ungrateful bastard of a man, really-"

"Cindy, be quiet." Igor said quietly, narrowing his eyes at her. "He doesn't need to hear this. The man's seriously hurt. Whether or not he'll become one of us, we have to save him, even if it's only for the moment."

Crouching towards the man, Igor offered his hand.

"â€|Thank you." The man said gratefully as he took it.  
>"...I'm sorryâ€|I can't exactly tell you if I'm for this 'Resistance' or notâ€|" He muttered quietly to Igor.<br>Igor shook his head. "Don't worry yourself over that."

"I-I don'tâ€|exactly know what's been going on here. I'm not really sure how long it's been." The man said, sighing. "â€|I feel as if I'd been underground for a thousand years."

At that, Igor crooked an eyebrow in confusion.

"â€|I am Doug Rattmann."  
>"I am the last surviving employee of Aperture Science."<p>

## 7. Borealis

\_To axell00: Dude, thanks, really for all the reviews, and I've fixed up the location plot hole for all the past chapters. Continue doing what you're doing, 'cause it's reeeaaaally helpful.\_

\_Merry Christmas to the rest of you guys, and I wish you peeps a good new year.\_

\* \* \*

><p>In the midst of a hazy darkness, Doug saw a light.<p>

Several lights actually, each of them a dull, dark, shade of red.

\_Up. I have to go up.  
><em>The single thought filled his vacant mind, propelling him to move.

It had been hours, maybe even days of this cycle. A countless loop of lights, each covered bulb seeming darker, more foreboding than its predecessor. The steps of the ladder seemed to grow slowly larger, and his body slowly smaller. Every step seemed more difficult, each step more grueling to reach than the last.

Salvation had reached him, not in the form of a beam of light, not in the form of a holy choir, or a beautiful orchestra, but in the dull, grimy form of a rusting step on a metal ladder. The last step of the metal ladder, and the scraped, dusty, almost invisible yellow words that adorned the shaded ceiling of the elevator chute.

'Surface Exit'.

His vision faded to black, and then back to colour.  
>What he first noticed, was his own, thin, bony hands. And then the cracked, once familiar concrete beneath it.<p>

Frantically his eyes moved from below, scanning his left, then his right, taking in all the views of the surface as he could, as if it were a mirage that would disappear at any moment. Oddly enough, he could barely see. It was dark, suddenly so very dark after the dim, but still lighted elevator chute he had been in.

>Eventually, his eyes moved upwards.<p>

Above him, he could see the full moon. He could see the stars. The soft white light that radiated from all of them, and the peaceful, natural darkness that surrounded it.

>Stunned, unmoving, barely even daring to breathe, he sat there, gazing at the stars, above the dead and decaying facility, a dizzying feeling of falling into the sky slowly taking hold of him.<p>

What started out as a mere rumble in his body, an urge to move, a want to do something- anything but sit there, turned into a faint wheezing in his throat, then a roaring, crazy laughter that resonated throughout the whole area.

He was alive. She was alive. They had finally succeeded.

His gaze faded again, slowly focusing on to the roots of a tree he had apparently stumbled on.

Cursing under his breath he stood, his knees almost buckling beneath him as he held tightly on to the tree trunk for support.

He had decided to head east from the decrepit back entrance of Aperture, the original destination of the fire exit. In the west, opposite to his area, there were the wheat fields and the parking lot (if they had remained unchanged), the exit of the several surface elevators located near the test chambers. If he remembered correctly, there was a rather large town there, near the outskirts of another, larger city.

For some time he considered heading there, but soon changed his mind. It was too far. And walking far distances was risky, especially in the dark, when he still didn't know how much the nearby environment had changed. No, he eventually decided against it.

>Instead, he would walk towards a small town the Aperture scientists constructed in the east. Though less a 'town' and more a large dormitory-like settlement, there were several other unrelated businesses and families living there, and Doug figured that if he needed help right away, it would be the fastest and best place to go.<p>

If it still remained, that was.

It hadn't taken him long to figure out that there may have been a rather, large gap between his last escape, and his awakening from stasis.

Everything that had once been in pristine condition underground had been turned over, decayed, and reclaimed by nature. There was no wonder the situation would be worse on the surface.

What had once been a light, spacious woods had turned into a dense forest, and what had once, even then had been a spindly road was reduced to flat moss, grass, and almost nothing of the concrete that

once covered it.

Time seemed to skip on as he walked toward his destination, a repeat of falling and rising up again as he kept tripping over obstacles in the dark, exhaustion threatening to drive him to the ground.

When he first heard the silent thumping sound, the sound of heavy footsteps, and saw the blue, glowing lights from two odd looking flashlights, he was relieved. He thought it was a person, maybe a part of the town security on night duty.

\_Finally, another human. \_He thought, relief spreading warmth through his veins.

Not willing to miss his chance, he called out to the mysterious stranger as loud as he could, raising his glowing pink cube (with some difficulty) to signify his location.

But when the footsteps turned to quiet, mechanical growling, and the growling turned to aggressive yaps, a warning in his head had begun to tick quietly. Lowering the cube, Doug frowned. Something was \_off.

><em>Doubt turned to fear, and fear to confirmation as he heard the odd sound of something \_charging \_toward him, and the blue- unnatural \_creature \_appeared from the bushes before him.

Some distance from him the double-eyed, alien-like tripod creature crouched, incessantly growling as if readying to pounce on it's pray. Instantly, his mind snapped into action. This creature, whatever it was, was \_not \_his ally.

Instinctively he ducked down behind his oversized cube, just a flash before blue, glowing darts projected from the creature's eye-like flÃ©chette launcher, digging themselves straight into the companion cube's metal casing. Sound whirred from the darts, and before Doug could react, they exploded, flipping the cube over him with its knock back.

Exposed and in panic, Doug relied on the one, single instinct that drove him through his fight underground. The instinct that helped him live to this very day.

\_Flee. Flee and survive.\_

In the distance he heard a mechanical screech, another blue dart flying straight at him as his vision blurred again, fading quickly into darkness.

This time, he didn't feel impact.

\* \* \*

><p>"â€|mustâ€|wakeâ€|"<br>In the distance, Doug thought he could hear someone mumbling.

From the dark, stagnant pit he was in, his mind began to clear, feeling and vision gradually returning to the other parts of his body. Soon he heard the voice talking quietly to him again, an odd voice with a mysterious accent he couldn't quite place his finger on.

"â€|The Rat Man must wakeâ€|"

>The voice mumbled again, closer than he had ever heard it before.<p>

Slowly his eyes glazed into focus as he blinked lazily and stared up at the bright, green light, sluggishly not registering what he saw.

Right by his head there seemed to be a glowing, green orb, floating by itself, seemingly connected to nothing at all. Surrounding it where two brown, alien-looking branches of a sort, maybe a tree or an odd arrangement of fingers-

\_Wait.\_

From above him, two faces where peering down, a man he recognized â€" though from where, he couldn't quite remember yet â€" and another, an oddly \_different\_-looking person with wrinkly, greenish-brown skin and a single, wide red eye-

\_Wait a second.\_

"Good, you're awake." The man â€" Igor, he remembered now â€" said contentedly.

The green orb faded as Doug blinked again, his vision now clearer than ever.

"It seems we have been fortunate to have found this man at this time." The man- the \_thing \_said next to him.

The sharp yell of surprise came long before the urge to clamp his mouth shut.

"Aa-AAAGH!" Doug yelled, instinctively scrambling backwards until he hit the wall in the back of the bed, complete shock and fear sobering his once drowsy mind like an electric shock.

Beside the discernibly normal looking man was a lanky, seemingly hunched-up bipedal \_alien\_, with one large red eye in the middle of its face and two, less obvious eyes sitting above it. Two arms protruded from its sides â€" similar to that of a normal human's â€" but from the two arms branched out two, long \_claws \_that could only be described as nothing less than a large bird's talons. From the middle of its torso a short, \_third\_ arm rooted out, which, much to Doug's surprise and disgust, moved exactly like the other two. Three functional eyes and a third, functional arm. \_Whatever they are,\_ Doug thought,\_ They sure do like coming in threes.\_

"Woah, woah! Easy there, Mr. Rattmann!" Igor calmly said, a mixed look of mild surprise and amusement on his face as he observed Doug's violent reaction to his partner.

>"Have you never seen a Vortiguant before?"<p>

Unconsciously crouched on the back of the bed with his arms covering his head in a defensive position, Doug blinked. \_Wa- was he supposed to \_know\_ that thing?\_

Slowly, he shook his head.

What had already been a poorly concealed smile on Igor's face bloomed into a full fledged grin at Doug's actions, as he coughed politely in feeble attempt to mask his obvious amusement.

"â€|Well then- that there is our local Vortiguant. Vortiguants are one of the few- no, most likely the only friendly aliens that've landed to earth with the Combine. Odd society they have, but if you get used to them they aren't half bad. This one's been helping me heal you this whole morning."

Beside him, the creature â€" \_Vortiguant\_ had been eyeing Doug quietly, an unreadable expression etched upon its face. Holding out its left hand as if to invite him to a handshake, the Vortiguant waited patiently for the still-dumbstruck Doug to react.

"The Rat Man has my greetings." Its voice rumbled quietly.

After some moments of gaping in disbelief and quietly assessing whether or not he was seeing things, Doug raised his right hand in return to the creature's left, and weakly shook the Vortiguant's hand.

"Uh, hi." He sputtered quietly.

Beside the two Igor nodded, his arms folded in front of him

"â€|Well, I'm glad we've come to a peaceful conclusion." He said, a faint smile still playing on his face. "But right now time is of the essence, and we have to hurry to the main base as soon as possible."

>"Thanks a lot for your help," He nodded to the Vortiguant. "I'll take over from now."<p>

As the Vortiguant turned to leave, Igor nudged at Doug to rise from the bed.

>"Come on, we have to go now." He said quietly.<p>

"-May I ask a question?" Doug timidly asked.

>"Go ahead."<br>"Where are we, and where are we going to?"

"â€|Ah." Igor blinked. "Yes. I suppose I haven't told you about that yet."

"Wellâ€|" His explanation went like this:

>Shortly after his rescue from the Hunter, Doug passed out, leaving the two to have to drag him back to their resistance base. When they returned, a message had been left by the main base- the White Forest base to update as soon as possible on their current standing, and any news they had. After some discussion from within the members of the base, the leader of the Resistance in their area sent them the recent news of their sector; the hunters that had come to terrorize the surroundings of the base, and their number of surviving citizens- along with the one, new recruit that had been found with no citizen's uniform, and nothing to tell them where he came from or what he was. The only thing that had told them where he had had come from was this single, worn out ID tag on his apparent lab coat that read:  
<em>Douglas Rattmann, Aperture Science<em>. A place nobody in the base had ever heard of before.



>Soon after the radio message was sent, a reply from the White Forest base was given, telling them to bring the man to the main base as soon as he recovered. Interestingly enough, the haggard man they had unknowingly saved from the Hunter was a man of high interest to the upper rung of the Resistance.<p>

"â€|What would they want from me?" Doug asked quietly.  
>"I don't know," Igor replied apologetically, "If I did, I would have told you that first. But if it makes things any better, me and Cindy are going to the main base with you to help you out."<p>

Inwardly, Doug sighed. The very little he knew of this current world was slowly crumbling down. Hunters? Resistance? \_Combine?\_ What the hell did \_that\_ mean?

Exactly how much of the world had changed to make \_him\_ a wanted man?

~oOo~

A short meet-up with Cindy (in which she subsequently had begun chattering excitedly on how she was \_definitely\_ going to get an autograph from this woman named 'Alyx' when she got to the White Forest base), and an almost panicked search of the companion cube later (to which Doug awkwardly explained that he literally \_couldn't\_ go anywhere without), the three (and cube) met up at a rather large warehouse bordering the small, run-down dormitory town of Aperture that acted as their resistance base.

Inside it were several other people fixing up cars and tending to certain weapons Doug didn't recognize- many of which was later explained to be hand-held rocket launchers. Making their way to the very back of the warehouse, Igor typed in a pass code by a security lock on the wall, which after a small \_beep,\_ proceeded to slide open and reveal a concealed door, neatly hidden by the seemingly unsuspecting wall in front of it.

Within the door was a small and narrow stairway leading down, which then lead to another spacious room below it. This room though, was slightly different.

In the middle of the dim, bare, concrete block of a room was a large and bulky contraption, with numerous electric plugs surrounding it and a single, complicated-looking control booth beside it.

"What is this?" Doug asked as he timidly laid his hand on the large machine. Even working as a scientist in Aperture Laboratories, the literal origin of 'Mad Science'- this machine was unlike anything he had ever seen before.

"That," Igor started, already typing commands into the control booth, "Is our key to the main base, Mr. Rattmann."

"Though it may be slightly hard to accept for a man who's been \_underground\_ for the last twenty years or so," He paused as a small beep came from the control booth and its screen flashed; 'Coordinates accepted'. "This is essentially a teleporter, which can move a man large distances â€" as long as there is a receptor on both sides that is â€" almost instantaneously."

Doug blinked. Was this bulky, alien-looking thing supposed to be a portal?

"I understand if you are shocked," Igor said, misinterpreting Doug's reaction as surprise to his words. "I guess it would feel as if you've suddenly been put in the land of science fiction."

Doug bit back his reply, the retort almost spilling out of his mouth without thinking.

><em>I've been <em>living\_ in science fiction my whole career.\_

"Well," Igor looked back down to the booth, inputting commands as three, once unmoving braces of the contraption slid back, clicking to place as it created an opening just large enough for two people to fit through. "Mr. Rattmann, Cindy, it's time for you to go."

"Gotcha!" Cindy chirped as she proceeded to firmly grip on to Doug's arm and drag him straight to the middle of the machine.

"Cindy, if in any case this teleport goes wrong â€" though it shouldn't â€" I need you to protect Mr. Rattmann, and get him to the closest resistance post you can access." At this Igor turned to Doug. "They should already be expecting you at their base. It may take some time, but I'll be following you two as soon as I can find someone else to help me get there."

"Wait-" Doug hurriedly sputtered as the middle of the machine- the machine's platform slowly began to lift, and the braces of the machine began to rotate, blocking his only exit out of the contraption."-What do you mean, 'If something goes wrong'?"  
>"Are you worried about that?!" Cindy laughed almost inaudibly beside him, a large whirring and a light quickly beginning to envelope the both of them. "Don't worry Dougy-boy, it should be perfectly fine-"<p>

A flash of bright light and then the odd sensation of wind.

From the outside, the two had disappeared from the machine with a single, silent, fwoosh.

Here we go again.\_

~oOo~

There was the odd feeling of being deconstructed, and reconstructed again.

Doug hadn't found it particularly pleasant to go through portals- even in Aperture, for the odd, tingling feeling that passed around his whole body as he entered or left. As much as possible, he tried to avoid it.

It hadn't been long before he realized, what he had been feeling then was the same sensation he was enduring now- except much, agonizingly slower.

He could have been there, in that white, whizzing space for mere seconds, or even a millennia of time. Whichever it was, he couldn't

tell. Thoughts criss-crossed his head faster than he himself could interpret them, and around him the bodiless voices rose and fell, each as disconcerted as he was.

Before he could react, before he could even begin to form words to describe his flight, he was back.

In the same machine. On earth. \_In a different room.\_

"-See?" Cindy chuckled beside him. "Wasn't \_so\_ bad, was it?"

Before he could reply to the girl (something on the lines of; "That was \_terrible.\_"), a small, timid-looking balding man in a lab coat stepped up before them, lowering a clipboard he had once been holding tightly on to.

For a minute he looked up at them, a brief look of surprise crossing his face. An awkward moment of gazing at the two, (Doug could've sworn that he was staring chiefly at him) the man looked back down at his clipboard and coughed, clearing his voice.

"You are- Dr. Douglas Rattmann, I presume?" The older man said, arranging the big, black-edged, thick-rimmed glasses that adorned his head.

>"â€|Yes." Doug slowly replied, unused to having his full name called. "That would be me."<br>"Ah, good." The man looked up from his clipboard and guided the two out of the machine. "Greetings, fellow scientist, my name is Isaac Kleiner. Please, call me Dr. Kleiner if you would prefer to do so."

Doug blinked. \_'Isaac Kleiner'\_ was a familiar name.

>Where had he heard it from, though? This man definitely wasn't a scientist he knew from Aperture.<p>

"Well, come now, you two. I do believe the others are already waiting for us in the lab." Dr. Kleiner said as he guided the two towards the door, and out into a bare, unknown hallway.

Inside the twisting, underground complex of a resistance base, the trio walked silently, each holding their separate thoughts and comments on their own. Cindy was noticeably quieter without the presence of Igor by her side, but Doug figured it was just because of the lack of \_anything\_ to commentate on. Even Cube stayed silent, gazing in awe around its surroundings. This was its first time outside of Aperture, and its first time to see human's other than him. There was no doubt it would take some time to let things set in.

>The <em>voices<em> on the other handâ€|

"\_He's not taking you anywhere good, and you know that."

><em>"\_Come back, you don't belong here."

><em>"\_What are you even doing here?"

><em>"\_You're forgetting about somethingâ€|You're forgetting about something very important."\_

If this had been any other time, Doug's first urge would've been to ask the nearest location where he could get his medication. Anything, \_anything\_ to shut them up.

Though he was holding on, it was getting slowly harder and harder to maintain absolute sanity.

The next he looked up from the ground, two doors slid open before him, revealing a group of people â€" two men, a woman, and a Vortquant â€" reconciling in what seemed to be a very basic laboratory. As he hesitated to enter, not realizing how far he had come from the teleportation room, his guide- Dr. Kleiner went in first, clipboard in hand and a pleasant smile ready on his face.

Clapping his hands to catch the attention of the small crowd, Kleiner said,  
>"Dr. Magnusson, Alyx, Gordon, I would like you to welcome our fellow Aperture scientist, Dr. Douglas Rattmann."<p>

~oOo~

What had come into the lab was far from what she had expected.

Though she had heard of the several, rather famous rumours of Aperture science and their scientists from her father, Eli (most rumours consisting of their founder who had apparently gone crazy after falling ill to disease, and their amazing lack of consideration for the safety of their test subjects, whatever tests they were doing there), the scientist she had been expecting to see was a white-haired, Einstein-like crazy scientist-looking person, not an actual madman.

Inside the room, behind Kleiner walked in a painfully bedraggled, gaunt man in a dirty lab coat, oddly splashed with the bright colours of orange, blue, and red- no, she was pretty sure that was blood.

>On his back he had strapped a large, unnatural-looking pink cube adorned with hearts â€" whether it was supposed to be a machine or another sort of contraption she couldn't tell â€" and when he looked up, the pupils in his clear blue eyes were of uneven sizes, strengthening, if not embodying his appearance of insanity.<p>

In the room he entered with a small limp, his injured, still bloodied right leg dragging behind him as he stood in the entrance, slouching timidly as if to make himself seem smaller. As if to hide himself.

Though she didn't want to admit it, she could tell the other people in the room shared her opinion.  
>Whoever this man, this scientist was, he looked completely, utterly insane.

Some distance from her, she could see Dr. Magnusson's disgusted sneer of a frown, now more intensified than it ever was around the other members of the resistance. Gordon looked on at the man with a blank, quiet stare, and beside him, Uriah observed the man as well, the usual, unreadable expression of all Vortquants embedded in his face.

From behind the man, another person, a female resistance member rose up beside him, taking charge of the small, awkward silence that surrounded them all.

"Hello," The young, ginger haired woman chirped, breaking the ice. "-Um, am I supposed to be here for this? 'Cause, you know, I could step outside if you guys wanted me to." She said, momentarily glancing nervously toward the wall on her right. >At that, the man beside her, Doug, turned sharply toward the girl, loudly, audibly muttering; <em>"Goddamnit Cindy, I thought you were here to help me!"<br>\_In reply she shrugged, an expression that read, \_tough luck man \_written all over her face. "Well you know, rules and stuff, right? I mean, confidentiality issues and such-"

"No." Dr. Magnusson coughed quietly, interrupting the girl. "You can stay. In fact, please do."

By that time most of the people in the room had calmed down, a relaxed breeze replacing what used to be a tense, cramped space. Alyx, for one, was sighing quietly, generally just relieved that the insane-looking scientist wasn't as \_irregular\_ as he seemed. Maybe this man could even come to use.

"So," Dr. Magnusson boomed, regaining his straight, strict posture.

>"I am Arne Magnusson. These two here," He said, pointing at Gordon and Uriah, "Is Uriah, my personal assistant, and Dr. Gordon Freeman, a colleague from Black Mesa."<p>

At that, Doug's eyebrows rose in question and surprise. \_After all this 'Resistance' and 'Combine', Black Mesa \_still \_exists?\_

"I'm Alyx Vance," The brown-skinned woman in the room, Alyx offered quietly, "But you can just call me Alyx." She said, flashing him a tired smile.

"You \_are,\_ Dr. Douglas Rattmann, I presume?" Dr. Magnusson questioned him, still skeptical of the man's true identity.

>"â€|Yes," Doug replied hesitantly. "But please, there is no need to call me by that title. I've lost that name long ago, along with the fall of Aperture Science."<p>

A certain silence washed over the group of scientists, each looking around with surprise at one another.

"Is it true then?" Dr. Magnusson asked quietly, his voice low. "That Aperture Science fell- not to the Combine, but to its own machinery?"

Doug grimaced, clearly uncomfortable about that statement.

>What was so bad, so <em>powerful<em> about this 'Combine' that it could be suggested to wipe out the entirety of a large company like Aperture Science? Was it a sort of governing body now? Was that what they needed a Resistance for?

"â€|Yes. That is true" Doug finally replied. "But I still don't understand the meaning of this 'Combine', you people keep mentioning."

Dr. Magnusson blinked, then briefly looked around. Whatever gazes returned to him were as blank as his were, and similarly confused.

>Slowly, he turned back to Doug. "â€|Exactly how much time, did you say you were <em>underground<em>?"

"I'm not entirely sure myself." Doug replied, looking at the floor in poor attempt to avoid the eye contact of the others.

>"I presume I was in there for a couple of months. Maybe even half a year, calculating the rotations of the moon." He looked up, resisting the strong urge to look right back down. "â€|The most I know is that when Aperture went to hell, it was still in the warm spring of 1998. I put myself into stasis sleep after that- and I don't know how long it's been since then."<p>

The crowd of scientists looked around, their tense, silent gazes now broken with the hushed tones of whispering and shock.

"Please," The woman- Alyx said rising from the small, comfortable-looking sofa she was once sitting on. "Don't be surprised if I tell you this- but you've been underground for far longer than what you seem to believe."

"1998 was twenty years ago." Alyx said, looking at the dumbstruck man straight in the eyes. "The year \_everything\_ \_went to hell."

~oOo~

A story of an apocalypse- of aliens and the enslavement of mankind followed in its wake.

She told Doug about Black Mesa, the large portal storms originally generated by them, and then the seven hour that followed. In a single day, the earth had fallen to the aliens, and had succumbed to the rule of \_them\_, the 'Combine'. She spoke about the absence of movement that happened afterwards, the steady growth of the Combine army, the synth creatures- the \_monsters\_ the Combine had created from human's that dared rebel against them. Then she told him about the Resistance. The return of Gordon Freeman.

That was when everything changed.

Now the Resistance â€" and in its wake, humanity itself â€" was on the verge of regaining their freedom, after being captured for so long. They only needed one last push, one last \_thing\_ to eliminate all the Combine forces on the planet. But what they needed, couldn't have been created, nor found, by any scientist in Black Mesa. No, what they needed was not a contraption of their own, but something \_much\_ bigger.

"-That is where you come in." Dr. Magnusson said, facing Doug.

"As you may be able to tell, the little that remain of us scientists are from Black Mesa- and though we are more than fully capable of creating ingenious weaponry, we have spent very little time creating portals and teleportation channels, with only minor successes. At the end of our own line, what we needed to find was an alternative solution." Dr. Magnusson paused, a sour taste rising in his mouth as he said the next words. "â€|And what we found was \_you\_. \_That is what we need. A portal-creating device from Aperture Science."

Doug looked up from where he was now sitting in obvious shock.

>Where *Black Mesa* - the company that had always been blamed in Aperture for stealing their creations - knew this confidential information from, was a mystery.

"\_But," Dr. Magnusson added, cutting Doug off before he could reply. "It is not the handheld portal device that we require right now."

>"No," He added quietly. "It is what is concealed within the Aperture ship, *the Borealis*."

At that, Doug almost flinched.

There was no way in hell they could have known about that. Even in Aperture the true existence and the whereabouts of the ship where kept a mystery. Only few people knew about the importance of the ship, and those who did, had sworn on their life to keep it concealed.

>Though, even that had become all for naught.<p>

"â€|The ship is gone." Doug mumbled, almost inaudibly to Dr. Magnusson. "I don't know its whereabouts, or what's happened to it after the accident."

Dr. Magnusson sighed, shaking his head.

>"We do not *need* you to tell us the ship's location, Dr. Rattmann. We know that already."

Pointing a small controller at the screen of a computer near them, Dr. Magnusson pressed a button, displaying a map, a blueprint, and the short video of a seemingly normal cargo ship- with the large logo of Aperture Science written across it.

"â€|The Borealis." Doug said in quiet awe. "I never thought I would see it again."

"Yes. It is indeed the Borealis." Dr. Magnusson said, cutting the video feed off impatiently. "But right now, you are here for more important things than to gaze at the ship."

>"-Right now, we need you to *use* *it*." He finished sharply.

"Of possibly all the scientists remaining on this earth, you are the most qualified to take control of what is in there. It is not a slim chance that you may be the only one who understands how to control it." Dr. Magnusson looked at him straight in the eyes. "And god knows what we need most from the unstable Aperture science is control."

"â€|I can't do it." Doug replied, his voice quavering slightly.

"Science like this has never been tested before. I can guarantee nothing will go wrong-"

>"*We* don't have the time to leisurely test this!" *Dr.* Magnusson snapped, his short span of patience suddenly cutting loose. "If we wait any longer than now the Combine will regroup and strengthen, and all our sacrifices would have gone to waste!"

Doug flinched, cowering slightly as the crowd around him silenced all other sounds.

"â€|Maybe you haven't been enslaved by the Combine for the past

twenty years," Dr. Magnusson spoke, a flame in his eyes. "But \_I\_ have, and I \_refuse\_ to be held back any longer."

Around Doug the people looked to each other, some reflecting worry for the poor scientist, others reflecting a strong sense of acknowledgement to Magnusson's words in their eyes. They had all gone through so much, for so \_very\_ long. Too much had been lost to hold back, and they couldn't continue like this anymore- not now, not ever.

"-Still, I wouldn't be able to \_use\_ the machine, much less \_control\_ it if I couldn't access what was inside the ship." Doug replied quietly. "And as of now, we don't have the means to."

At that, Dr. Magnusson raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"The Borealis," Doug continued, "Was a top-secret project, meant only for the eyes of the \_Aperture\_ employees concerned with it."  
>"I was lucky enough to be included in that project once or twice during my career, and I have been inside the ship." Doug paused. "And it is, for lack of better words, a single, gigantic, <em>test chamber.<em>"

"â€|Built by Aperture, and until its release, meant for Aperture's eyes only. Of course, we planned to conceal it using one, \_large\_ container. Within the ship we tested it, and within the ship we concealed its blueprints, ready to move it or hide it when we saw fit. But underneath the docks, there were \_other\_ precautions we took to hide the technology inside it."  
>"Within the ship, all normal entrances and exits are concealed, each of them replaced by a white panel, and guarded by automatic sentry turrets. If you know as much as I think you do, you will understand that there is only one way to get through to the machine."<p>

Dr. Magnusson frowned, sudden realization hitting him hard.

"The ship is a single, large \_test chamber\_, both for the machine, and the Aperture Hand-held Portal Device. If we don't have that, it would be impossible to navigate inside the Borealis." Doug paused. "And even if we did, it would still be too dangerous. The only person I would let through, the only person with even a slim chance of success-"

"\_Has not been seen since her escape from the underground." \_Cube ended, speaking up for the very first time in the conversation.

For a second, Dr. Magnusson looked at Doug, puzzled as to why he stopped talking mid-sentence. It wasn't long though, before he realized he wouldn't continue.

"â€|The Aperture Hand-held Portal Device is attainable, is it not?" He questioned him.

>"-Yes," Doug answered hesitantly. "But only through desperate measures."<br>"The only way to attain possession of the portal device would be to take it from Aperture- and I-I don't want to go back there."

Another silence spread amongst the small crowd, nobody wanting to push the man any farther than he was willing to go.



In the corner of the room, Gordon sat beside an oddly very quiet Alyx, listening to the mysterious scientist's argument. Sooner or later, Gordon mused, he would have to raise his hand and scarface himself, as he usually did.

But before he could, just a flash before he could stand up and intervene, Alyx had risen beside him, a determined, solid look on her features.

"If you won't go- I will." She proclaimed to Doug, fire burning in her eyes.

>"We've come so far, and we've sacrificed so much- nothing, no Combine, no Aperture, no machine is going to stop us- is going to stop me now."

"I'll get that device from Aperture, even if I have to do it alone."

## 8. The Beating Quota

Authors Note: Thanks for the comment Guest Reader. I didn't know that the downfall of Aperture/Black Mesa in 1998 thing was fanmade, I always thought it was cannon. Either way, I'll be sure to fix it. Again, thanks and I hope this story continues to be a good read for you.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Chell almost gagged, bile rising up in her throat as she viewed at what remained of the monster Nick had just shot down before her.

"That," He said, nudging the body with his tip of his toe, "Is what we call a headcrab zombie."

Under the white, hard mask she was given, his voice spoke clearly to her, transmitted by a small radio under her ear.

"Remember Daisy," He said, picking up the apparently separate creature that covered the (once) man's head. "Do not let this thing reach your head. You do not want to die like this. Under no circumstances should anyone ever die like this. Maybe in the past, when it'd just arrived on earth it was understandable that people died, but now that we know exactly what this thing does, there is no acceptable reason why a soldier like yourself can't fight a tiny thing like this off."

Chell nodded, silently acknowledging the man's words.

Today was field day.

The night day after her arrival, she had been rested as usual, and in the morning, given the same uniform as the other civil protection, ordered to go outside by Nick, (who was apparently now in charge of her) and begin practicing her new job, as he had explained.

From the outside she looked like any other civil protection member, spare for one small detail; her shoes. Oddly enough, she had been allowed to keep her old long-fall boots. After trying to fit her feet

(and failing) into a numerous collection of bigger, heavier boots, Nick had given up, allowing her to use the old boots with the lines of \_"It's fine, no one's gonna be staring at your feet while you beat them up with a stick anyway."\_

Now, along with a still uncomfortable Steve, (even though it was a rest day for him, he'd been forced to tag along) Nick was giving her a tour of the city. Albeit a little violent, zombie and alien-ridden tour, but a tour nonetheless.

>Together the odd three walked the back alleyways of City 26, Nick giving a list (whilst shooting down) the odd, apparently sub-normal, violent creatures that haunted the place. Steve on the other hand, wasn't <em>as</em> keen on using force, opting to stay out of the way and knocking the creatures down when needed to, instead of shooting and killing them.

For Chell, this was the perfect shooting range.

Not surprisingly, it had taken her little time to get used to the small gun, already used to the powerful knockback and weight of the hand-held portal device. The only thing she had to \_really\_ learn, was the fact that \_this\_ gun wasn't meant for making holes in white, moonrock filled walls, but in \_creatures.\_ Living(?), moving creatures. Small accidents didn't happen just once or twice before she learnt \_not\_ to point the gun at the friendly two.

\_"Remember,"\_ Nick had said once, supporting her arm to help her aim at a coming zombie. \_"If you are going to shoot to kill, always, \_always\_ aim for the head."\_

Prior to what they had called the 'Seven Hour War', Nick had apparently been a trained soldier, in a team of marines under the last true human government- though what that \_actually\_ meant, she had no clear idea. But, interestingly enough, this had made him one of the best armed fighters amongst the self appointed recruits in the civil protection, up to the point that he had been deployed by the Combine in a selected team to fight a legendary rebel, just several weeks before.

To capture or kill the revolutionist â€" a scientist of all people! â€" aptly named Gordon Freeman, was his mission.

But in the end, he was the last and only remaining survivor of the deployed protection group- at the price of a bullet to his now missing right eye. It was a near, fortunate miss to his brain.

>Again, Gordon Freeman had evaded capture.<p>

After his ordeals in City 17, Nick's post had been moved to the more peaceful, uneventful City 26, as a form of punishment for his failure to comprehend the man by the Combine head quarters. He was lucky they hadn't killed him, he mused afterwards, though at the time, he wished he could've died there, with his friends in battle.

>Now, he had forever lost that chance.<p>

But of all the bad occurrences, \_one\_ good thing happened on Nick's arrival at City 26. He had been re-united with his long lost \_brother\_, Steve- though at the time, Chell didn't quite understand what he meant by that. The two looked \_nothing\_ alike.

"\_And now,"\_ he had said, a rare, soft smile on his face. \_"Another member of my family has returned to me."

><em>Though who that was, he had never explained.

"...Daisy? Hey, Daisy, are you paying attention?"

Chell's mind snapped back to reality, the sound of Nick's irritated (and slightly agitated?) voice reaching her ears.

"Get. Down. \_Now.\_" Nick seethed, gesturing Chell to crouch beside the two behind the corner of an alleyway wall.

Hurriedly she did as she was told, readying her pistol as she looked around for the next coming danger.

"Look." Nick told her, pointing at another alleyway just across the wall they were hiding behind. "Do you see that man?"

From behind his head, Chell peered over him, looking towards the direction Nick was pointing.

>In the narrow, dinky back road of an alleyway that lay before them, a dark-skinned man with a beanie hat, a bullet proof vest, and green, worn out clothes Chell had never seen before walked cautiously past, ever often turning around to assess any entity that may be watching him from the shadows. Whether by luck, or by his own recklessness, he hadn't noticed the three watching him, hidden behind the brick walls.<p>

In his arms the man held a rather large, heavy-looking wooden box, with an odd, orange sign that adorned the top. The same sign that seemed to have been spray-painted on his back.

"That," Nick whispered cautiously, "Is a resistance member."

Chell gripped her gun, nodding slowly.

>If there was anything she had learnt from their stories, it was that these 'Resistance members' were bad, bad people. Mad, crazy, <em>murderers<em> at best, who wrecked havoc onto a once peaceful city and seeped the seeds of fear and war into people's hearts. In their wake they brought \_monsters\_ with them, bipedal, seemingly sentient aliens and large, lion-sized insectoid aliens in dangerous, murderous packs.

Their cause: a 'Revolution'. Of what sort, Chell could not fully understand.

They didn't know, she presumed, that they were on the same side. In the war against these 'aliens' and the creatures of planet 'Xen', the combine " and on extension the civil protection " was on the side of the government.

"\_They all want a peaceful world", \_Nick had said to her in a safe, reassuring voice. \_"They all just want protection. Protection against evil, protection against the unknown."

><em>"\_Protection" \_He paused, \_ "-From themselves."\_

On the surface, above Aperture, humans were corrupted.

Like Glados, like the men that made her, humans are, from the beginning, all insane. They are all dangerous, treacherous beings,

who lie, and steal from others. \_"If they had the chance, they would kill you, merciless, as they all are"\_, Nick once said, his eyes staring into the distance.  
>"<em>That's why the world needs us."<em> He explained. \_"We protect them. We fend for the good, and we discipline the evil. In this world of black and grey, we draw the line. We calm the chaos."\_

'The chaos.'

>â€|This was so far from the utopia she had dreamed of underground.<p>

And though she didn't believe every single word Nick had said, (She knew well enough that she would've been a fool to do so after all her past mistakes) she knew that she wanted to.

>If anything, she wanted to believe in him. She wanted to believe in this new humanity above ground. And if he could, she wanted him to believe in her.<p>

This was her chance to prove her worth.

If she could help them catch this man, maybe, just maybe she would feel a little bit more welcome. Maybe a little bit more at home-

"\_Don't go out yet.\_" Nick snapped at Chell, noticing her itch to move. "â€|He seems to be bringing something, maybe back to his main base."

"If we wait for him, he may lead us to their nest."

From behind the corner of the alleyway, the three watched on quietly, each making sure not to make any sudden movements. Once the man left their sight, turning the curb as he went even deeper into the secluded labyrinth of a back alley, the three followed him, all maintaining a safe distance, and keeping a tight hold on their gun.

>Soon, the soft sound of footsteps faded, and the man stood silently, staring at the wall before him. At the end of the road, at what seemed to be a dead end, the resistance member put down his heavy load, and warily began to look around. The man's short journey had come to its end.<p>

And from the shadows, the three just watched.

For what seemed like hours, the silence continued, the man obviously relishing his sweet time as he looked nervously around him, his almost animalistic instincts telling him that he was being watched. Nervous and fidgety, Chell and the others waited, none of them daring to make a move before he showed them the entrance of the base.

>But finally, after countless staring and searching fruitlessly into the shadows around him, the man dismissed his instincts and picked up his load. Slowly, he began to approach the wall.<p>

\_Crunch.\_

It was only one small sound, one quiet footfall on the old, cracked concrete, but what he heard was enough to startle the him.

>In her over-eagerness, Chell had stepped forward. Eager to prove her worth and fidgety from waiting, she had moved just a second too fast.<p>

In a flash of an instant, the resistance member dropped his load and raised his concealed pistol.

Before him, there was no one.

From behind the corner, just out of view, Nick had pulled Chell back by the collar just in time, covering her mouth piece in an almost strangling death-grip. Beside him, Steve already held his gun up, ready for a coming attack.

The man took a step forward, and then stopped.

>Nervous and quavering, he looked again into the shadows. There was nothing there. He was sure of it.<p>

\_But\_ \_what if there is?\_

Slowly, the man took another step forwards. He knew he couldn't take any more chances.

\_Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

><em>On the dry, hard concrete, the only sound he could hear was his own silent footfalls.

Steve tensed, his trigger-finger twitching dangerously. Beside him, Nick's grip on Chell got tighter, and she could almost \_feel\_ his anger resonating off of him. No one dared make a sound.

Another step, and the man came into view.

Mute shock numbed the man's brain, and before he could react, Steve had already lunged at him, using his elbow as a block to roughly push the man away. Taken by surprise, the pistol flung from the man's hands, and he stumbled back with a yelp, falling to the ground. On the ground, momentarily dazed, the man looked up, only to see Steve's pistol leveled at his face. Before he could yell, before he could scream, the trigger was pulled.

A large, resonating\_ pang\_, and the quiet, almost disgusting sound of a body hitting the floor. By then, the man was no more.

~oOo~

On the corner of the dead end, sitting atop what looked like a large closed waste disposal can, Chell hung her head in shame.

After a large, lengthy amount of scolding from Nick, his frantic lines of \_"What the hell where you trying to do?!"\_ his \_"You could've died!"\_ and Steve's cold, disapproving silence trained directly at her, Chell had resolved to wait at the edge, where she could cause no harm.

"\_This is a really important mission. We can't let you get in the way."\_ Nick had said, his face invisible underneath the mask. "\_This is too dangerous for you to be part of."\_

Quietly, Chell sighed.

>What had started out as a training session for her seemed to have developed into something much more urgent after the two had revealed the contents of the box the resistance member was holding.<p>

Five Overwatch Standard Issue Pulse Rifles, and numerous amounts of ammo.

In a small city with only the Civil Protection â€" a protection group of otherwise normal men who'd only had minimal training and experience with combat â€" and the territorial Hunters guarding the area, this gun could cause absolute havoc. And if Nick's prediction was correct, this man was most likely just the first among many to smuggle in this same weapon, and prepare for battle after the reported downfall of one of their main city's, City 17.

They were really going to start a war.

>And if the three hadn't discovered their secret first, this was a war they could've possibly won.<p>

Nervously peeking at the body that still lay quietly on the floor, Chell shivered under her thick clothes.

>If one battle meant this, she didn't want to imagine what a war could look like.<p>

Around her, the two were searching around for an entrance, or whatever the resistance used to open that entrance to their city's base. If they could find it, and if they could rat out the resistance members who trained and lived in it. They could possibly divert the coming tragedy. They would be rewarded like heroes.

At least that was how Nick explained it.

Now he was pretty audibly (thanks to the microphone receptor system underneath the mask) muttering profanities toward his surrounding terrain, and complaining to Steve to work his ass harder (whatever that meant). Steve on the other hand, worked quietly, only bickering once or twice when Nick's profanities toward him went overboard. Oddly, enough, not once did either mention Chell.

>Under her mask, Chell frowned at the thought. It was either that she wasn't worth mentioning, that they were both disapproving of her mistake to the point that she was non-existent in their minds, or that they were trying to keep the topic of her mistake out of the way, in concern that she might be hurt by their words.<p>

For most likely the eighth time in that thirty minutes, Chell held her head in her hands. Whatever it was, Chell wasn't used to this 'silent' treatment.

>In Aperture, when <em>they<em> had \_something\_ to say to her they would tell her, whatever it was straight-forwardly, even if it was just something on the lines of \_"You're fat" \_or \_"You're adopted"\_. And even when they \_didn't\_ have anything to say, they would still say things, meaningless things, but all still directed at her. \_They\_ didn't ignore. Nor did \_they\_ avoid.  
>But then again, <em>they<em> were robots.

It was just her second day in society, and Chell's actions had already resulted in an absolute train wreck.

Sighing heavily, Chell looked up, attempting to observe her surroundings rather than be brought down by her darker thoughts. It didn't do anything to just think, anyway. Even if she couldn't be of help to the two, she could at least take in what she saw of the surface and observe what she needed to.

>This <em>is <em>what she wanted, anyway.

At the dull, cracking wall of brick across her, Chell stared, trying (and failing) to keep her mind off what she didn't want to think about. Idly, she noticed the pictures on the walls.  
>A wide variety of large and small pictures- drawings and posters covered the wall, each arranged messily on the worn-down brick of the building.<p>

'\_Graffiti'\_ the word popped up in her mind.

Though they were of various shapes, colours and sizes, they all shared the same theme, the same solemn tone.

>Slightly to the right of her view, she could see the more minimalistic of the etchings; a white poster with the dark outlines of a finely inked open hand, and on its open palm, a badge that adorned that symbol of the resistance. On the bottom of the drawing was bare, open space, spare for a cryptic message, <em>'Born'<em>. To the diagonal bottom of that, she could see the spray-painted images of three creature's heads- or, to be exact, their profiles. On the right, the first of the three, there was an '\_ape'\_ , his head drawn half open as if to expose what lay within its skull. Beside it was a man, his brain showing in the same way, though obviously more advanced than its predecessor. Finally, there was an unknown creature â€" no, it was a man in a mask â€" that showed his brain, its shape similar to that of an ape's. Not as advanced, not as intelligent as the humans.

Idly, she wondered if that was supposed to be them. The Civil Protection.

>Was it insulting them? <em>Maybe,<em> she thought, shrugging.  
\_Maybe.\_

In all honest truth, it didn't exactly have much effect. Even if it had quite adequately displayed that the Civil Protection was filled with mouth-breathing, ape-headed idiots (to which she disagreed with) the message seemed to come out as too subtle, too weak for her to comprehend. But then again, almost \_anything \_could be described as '\_Too weak'\_ in comparison to Glados's tiresome, unrelenting verbal abuse.

Slowly, against her own will, Chell's mind drifted back to Aperture.

She recalled the first time she had discovered writings on the walls- when she was first awakened, confused and alone, she had searched all the cracks in the walls in search of an exit, people, \_anything \_that wasn't made of cold, hard metal. Anything was okay, even if it was just a glimpse of something of natural\_,\_ a glimpse of something \_human.\_ And in the end, she actually \_did\_ find what she was looking for.

But what she saw there wasn't exactly what she had been expecting.

On a certain secluded wall of a test chamber â€" the place she had first received her companion cube â€" a single, inconspicuous panel protruded out, revealing a small concealed space behind it. With her strong sense of curiosity and the aid of her portal gun, Chell found a way inside, almost immediately regretting her decision as she

stepped foot in the room.

On the walls, scrawled in dark ink and a sickly red colour that reminded her oddly of dried blood " were the scribbles and the writings of an utter \_madman\_. Cryptic poems and obsessive lines concerning the companion cube were spread all over the place, the chaos within the artist's mind strung all across the walls.

>Along with that, there were several pictures of men, women, and all sorts of other people " all with their heads replaced by a companion cube. On the corner of the room (although the area was more of a small space than anything else) there was a sad, tattered cardboard bed and several empty cans of beans. The only signs of life left behind by the mysterious artist.<br>The same signs she would encounter again, and again, over the duration of her first escape. When she was in need of direction, she followed his markings. Whenever she was lost in the belly of the facility, she would always see the arrows.

>And soon, what was once an unsettling experience to see the artist's scribbling and his numerous 'dens', strewn across Aperture, slowly became an odd sort of comfort, a sort of peaceful seclusion from her metallic captor. Slowly, she was beginning to understand.<br>Art was a human concept. A way to send the message. And though she had failed, and failed again to heed the artist's warnings\_ ('The cake is a lie!') \_she understood where he had come from. What he had been through. And she respected him for that. It was odd, to say the least, that this insane, most likely long gone companion-cube obsessed man (woman?) would have been the one Chell could say she owed the most gratitude to.

As her eyes scanned almost unconsciously around her, her thoughts drifted in and out of the memory of the man's scribbling and paintings, all that she had seen, all that she had found. And idly, she noticed how observant she had been. She remembered the sad, quiet song of the radio that played in one of the broken chambers, and the messy, crazy, almost beautiful pictures that adorned the walls of the same room. She remembered the picture of the unknown woman she had seen when she got her third portal gun lead by Wheatley (strangely enough, the woman seemed to bare some resemblance to herself) and the bright, vibrant colours of blue and orange-

"|\_Orange?\_"

Chell's head snapped up, her chin rising from her palms.

In front of her, almost completely obscured from view by a large waste disposal container that lay before it, was an especially mossy and cracked, almost crumbling part of the brick wall. Above it, and covering almost all around it where the numerous amount of pictures and posters put there by the resistance members, almost each picture repeated, with a dull, quiet shade of black and white. But on the bottom, just underneath the mess behind the dumpsters, the only place you would have expected it to be empty, Chell spotted the top half of a round, orange, sign. And though it was still new to her, this sign was something she had come to learn all too well.

The sign of the resistance.

Almost leaping from her perched spot on top of the dumpster, Chell got off and ran to the other side, grabbing hold of the sides of the opposing container and successfully capturing the attention of the



other two.

"What's she doing?" Steve asked quietly.  
>"I honestly don't know." Nick returned with a shrug. "Maybe she saw something. Doubt it's anything big, though."<p>

Quietly the two made their way toward her, just as she pushed the light, seemingly empty dumpster to reveal what lay behind.

And what they saw was a rather large, orange resistance symbol " the same symbol they had seen on the top of the box of rifles and the now-deceased resistance member's back " and just underneath it, easily concealed by any object covering it, was a small, functional lever. Beside it, the words encrypted, 'Key'.

Without as much as a moment of hesitation, Chell pulled on the lever, and to her right, two large, concrete slates once situated on the middle of what seemed to be the wall of a dead-end quietly slid open, revealing a moderately sized entrance, and a dark, dimly lighted stairway leading down.

\_Jackpot.  
><em>Chell mutely grinned to herself in triumph.

For several moments, the two behind her stood quietly, both silent and frozen in place with surprise.

"Holy hell!" Nick finally muttered, still regaining his control on his posture.  
>"<em>Holy hell.<em>" He repeated, as Chell quietly rose from her currently kneeling position.  
>"Daisy you're brilliant!" Nick almost yelled as he brought her into a tight, unexpected hug.<p>

Amongst Nick bellowing complements and laughing his head off, Chell kept still, almost choking from his strong grip and grinning, almost giggling with her own laughter. Human contact and actual, non-sarcastic appraisal " Though it was new, she knew this was something she could get used to.  
>But beside the two, Steve still stood, unmoving as a rock, as if dazed- or unimpressed by her actions. And although she couldn't see his face, obscured by the mask, she could almost faintly tell that he <em>wasn't<em> pleased. That whatever emotion he had received from her actions was not " if anything " joy.

\_Well,\_ she thought, turning her head from him. \_Whatever I do won't seem to impress \_him\_ anyway.\_

After some odd, but treasured moments of Nick's bear-hugging and his loud, obnoxious laughter, Nick loosened his grip, and held her firmly by the shoulders.

"Now that that's over with, we have to go to the next step." he said, a serious quietude returning to his voice. "Now, we rat out the rodents."

~oOo~

Chell's brief moment of joy passed as quickly as it came.

The happy, talkative thoughts that had built up in her mind was instead replaced with a nervous, tensed silence, as she and Nick walked quietly down the stairs of the entrance, each with their guns in hand and ready for combat.

The two had gone in ahead, while Steve stayed behind for the time being, ordered by Nick to call for reinforcements.

"\_For the first few people at least," \_he'd said, \_"Surprise should be a bigger winning factor than numbers."\_

Quietly, cautiously, the two continued on their way down the steps.

>They didn't know if the entrance they were going into was the main entrance, the larger part of the underground base, with more people, or the back entrance, connecting to the other parts of what lay beneath ground.<br>If it was an entrance with people, they would have to be careful not to arouse suspicion. And though Nick knew he didn't need to, he raised a finger to his lips (at least where it should've been, above the mask) and nodded toward the door. If the cackling of their voices from under the mask was heard, it could blow their cover in a matter of seconds.

On the bottom of the steps, a seemingly normal, forlorn-looking wooden door stood, a sharp contrast from the foreboding, dim stairway that held it.

Quietly, Nick twisted the door knob. Locked.

"â€|\_Hey, is that Paul? Sure took him a long enough time. \_" A muffled voice came from inside the room.

At that Nick looked (presumably) warningly towards Chell, to which she returned with a quiet nod. Apparently, this was the entrance \_with\_ people.

"\_Paul, buddy, we've been waiting for you for like- what, an hour? \_" The man laughed to himself. Gradually, the sound of footsteps approached closer, and the two lifted their guns.  
>The door unlocked and twisted from the inside, the man complaining on to unhearing ears.<p>

"\_Sorry\_ \_we had to lock the door,\_" The man said, swinging the door open. "That old geezer \_'Sgt.' \_Bill was pretty paranoid about those new weapons you were gonna bring in-"

As the man in a beanie looked up, white, masked faces met his, and his casual, lax smile immediately flipped into a frown.  
>"-Well, you're not Paul." The man said, his voice flat.<p>

Without even as much as a nod to acknowledge his words, Nick pushed him forwards, barging into the room.

In the furnished, rather casual entrance room, three other people sat behind couches facing a television screen, turning in shock as they saw their team-mate fall back, and the two civil protection members breaking into the room.  
>Before any of them could react, Nick raised his gun and shot the man who opened the door twice, one bullet hitting him on his right arm, where he reached for his gun, and another, squarely on the

head.<p>

Their brains finally kicking into action, the three others present recoiled at the sound of the gunshots, sudden realization hitting them hard.

"CP's!" Another man in a beanie yelled as he fumbled and raised his pistol.

>In a matter of moments the others followed suit, leveling their guns at Nick just a second too late before the first man was shot down.<p>

From behind Nick, another CP- Chell appeared, and instead of using her gun, she lunged at the standing man " one of the last remaining two resistance members, using the couch as a catapult to jump over, and kick him down. Taken by surprise, the shocked man couldn't do as much as yell or shoot before the odd-looking boot flew towards him, landing heavily on his chest. Ungraciously the man grunted as he fell, the gun flying from his hands. Now, there was only one left standing.

The woman turned in shock as she looked around, her mind spinning as she noticed she was the last survivor. Her hands quaking and her body screaming at her to move, she lowered her gun and ran, making a mad dash towards the hallway.

At the end of it, she knew, there was an alarm. An alarm that would raise the emergency Klaxons of all the areas in the base.

>If she couldn't get out alive, neither would they.<p>

Nick raised his gun, shooting and closely missing the woman as she ran, the dimmer, darker lights of the hallway and his missing right eye contributing to his mistakes. Following her, Nick ran, his pursuit followed closely by Chell as she sped up beside him, soon overtaking his heavy strides.

Dazed, but still uninjured, the man who Chell had, in her panic, forgotten to check coughed quietly, rising up from his laying position as he reached for his gun.

In the hallway, Chell had almost reached the woman " just a second too late before she stopped at a certain lever on the wall, and turned to the two as she smiled. The audible, loud crack of the rusty lever sounded as she forcefully pulled it down.

From the corners of the rooms and hallways, a red, almost blinding light filled up the space as the Klaxons turned, their call loud enough for Chell to momentarily stumble and resist the urge to clamp a hand over her ears.

From behind her, Nick gritted his teeth from under the mask. Their cover was blown.

Now, the resistance would either take this as a chance to fight back, or run and escape like the cowards they were. But nevertheless, if this woman had thought that ringing the alarms was going to save her, or anyone else here, she was wrong. It was already far too late. And he was going to prove it.

Seizing the moment, and the bright, red, lights, Nick regained his

posture, and shot the woman twice. Once on the hand that gripped the lever, and another in the head. This time, his aim was perfect. As the body fell quietly, motionlessly to the ground, he thought he could almost \_hear\_ her triumphant, dying laughter.

Pushing past Chell, who stood stock-still beside the body, Nick reached for the lever.

>His right hand on the bottom of the lever, he began to pull it up. From behind him Chell looked on as she turned nervously, looking anywhere and everywhere- doing anything, <em>anything<em> to get away from the overwhelming sounds, the red, and the still, unmoving body before her. On the corner of her eyes, at the opening of the hallway, she thought she saw a shadow move.

In the presence of the loud, ringing sound of the Klaxons, she almost couldn't hear the shot being fired.

A bullet flew past the her, and landed hard, embedding itself directly into Nick's right wrist.

>"<em>-Gah!<em>" Nick yelped in pain as his position crumbled, taken by surprise.

Chell whipped her head at his reaction, turning to see the shooter at the end of the hallway.

><em>The man she couldn't kill.<em>

His deed done, the man staggered in the hallway, slowly closing in towards the two; the shell-shocked, unmoving Chell, and the momentarily defenseless, curled up Nick.

Slowly, the dark, still smoking point of his pistol turned to her.

Alarms rang in her own head, as in reality, and as the pistol aimed calmly, slowly at her, only one thought resonated in her head.

\_He's going to kill me.\_

It was a quiet, disturbing thought that had come up many, many times in the past.

\_I can't let that happen.\_

Though in the end, she always gave the same response.

In a flash, even before she was given time to think about her actions, she instinctively leveled \_her\_ pistol to his head, and pulled the trigger. Just a flash of a moment faster than him, her bullet flew, embedding itself squarely on his forehead as his gun was knocked out of his grip, his bullet digging itself harmlessly into the wall beside her.

>Again, she had saved herself.<p>

But in the red, loud room, flooded with both the sound of the alarms and the four immobile, dead bodies of the men they had killed, Chell dropped her gun, sinking weakly to her knees. As she looked on at the man who continued to stare at her in death, as she saw the blood seep from the wound on his head, only one voice, one quiet sentence was processed in her empty, fragile mind.

"\_You murderer.\_"

From far away, in a foggy, distant world, she thought could hear Nick's short, pained grunt as pulled up the heavy lever with his left arm, and the rumbling, almost audible sound of a hundred footsteps. As numerous Civil Protection reinforcements stormed in the scene, and the Klaxons ceased to turn, the hallway dimmed back down to a dark, stagnant space. In the dark, on the cold, hard concrete, Chell felt the silence piercing into her. The silence of the dark- the silence of the dead overwhelming her senses.

On her shoulder, only one feeling- the feeling of Nick's firm hand on her brought her to reality as she looked up, staring straight into the hollow, almost glowing eyes of the mask.

"That's my girl." Nick's voice whispered soothingly from her earpiece. "Good job, Daisy."

## 9. Daisy

\_By the way, special thanks to Sweet Christabel (check her out on my 'Favourite Authors' page, her Portal 2 stories are some of the biggest reasons I got back into writing) for being my beta-reader. It's helpful, and for some reason having a beta-reader makes me feel mighty epic.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Blankly staring across the empty, decrepit hallway of the civil protection base, Chell sat quietly on a wooden bench by the door, painfully reflecting on what she had just witnessed. What <em>she<em> had done, just hours before.

In front of her, the lights still flashed red. And numbly, in the midst of a silence too deafening for her to ignore, she could still hear the echoes of a cold body hitting the floor. The loud pang of her gun, and the quiet sound of a life ending. The fragile flame of a life she had just extinguished.

Under her thick armor, Chell trembled quietly.

â€|To think it could all end that easily.

On the same bench beside her, Steve sat, equally silent as he looked away from the young woman, allowing her â€" and himself â€" some space to think.

The three had just returned from their raid on the resistance base, ratting out and killing all resistance members who still remained â€" or were too slow to run â€" after the Klaxons had turned, and the red alarm lights flooded the area. Taken by surprise and not spared the mercy to properly prepare for the battle, most went down fighting and screaming, some even begging for their lives. By the end of it all, within the civil protection group of eleven men, (excluding the initial three), only two had been killed, and 58 resistance members â€" an estimated two-thirds of the radical resistance members in City 26 â€" had been taken down.

Underground, surrounded by the yells of pain and mercy from the

injured, the dying, and the crazed laughter of men he once thought he knew, Steve shuddered, almost unable to stand his ground. Around him, the floor was littered with bodies, and the walls were splattered with blood. Even for Steve â€" a man used to the standards of cruelty the Civil Protection displayed, time and time again â€" it was a complete and heartless massacre.

And the young, new woman beside him had been witness to it.

Quietly, he turned to the woman in concern.

When he'd first found the girl underground, she had been sitting by a still, silent body, a smoking gun beside her empty hands. From behind her, the form of another civil protection member, Nick, had loomed over her in the darkness, a single, reassuring hand placed firmly on her shoulder.

Silently, he'd said that the girl may have possibly saved his life.

"â€|Are you okay?" Steve asked, laying a cautious hand on the girl's back.

Violently flinching, Chell spun around in panic. Shaken and surprised, an almost feral growl instinctively escaped her throat as she laid eyes on the owner of the hand.

"\_Woah \_â€" hey!"

>Steve exclaimed as he promptly raised his arms and backed away.<p>

"-Look, lady, I don't want to hurt you."

Her momentary shock subsiding, Chell stared at him warily from underneath the mask, a sudden, heavy tiredness overcoming her being.

\_I know.\_

"â€|I was just going to ask if you were alright. You don't seem so, from the looks of it."

Silently, Chell raised an eyebrow.

><em>Since when the hell did this guy worry about my wellbeing?<em>

"I heard what you did there you know. Your first '\_catch'. \_"

\_Oh.\_ Chell turned away with disgust. \_So he's 'congratulating' me.\_

"-And I'm sorry." Steve said quietly, as he too looked away. "It must've been terrible."

For a moment, Chell couldn't quite comprehend what he had just said.

>Slowly, she turned back to the man in surprise.<p>

For the longest time since she and the others had arrived back to the base, they had been greeted with booming cheers and applause from the

other men in masks, regarded as heroes for the people that they killed. Nick was particularly celebrated; back-patting, joking, and loud calls for the medic following in his wake. In the midst of the raucous group, Nick held his injured right hand as he marched proudly amongst them, Steve and Chell trailing quietly behind.

What happened after passed as a fuzzy blur.

For what seemed like a long period of time, there was nothing. Nick went straight to the medical wing of the base, and without anything else to do, Chell followed. As she idly watched Nick's bleeding hand being patched up and fixed, (images of blood and the bodies of those that can never be fixed flashing through her mind)\*\*,\*\* the sound of the mechanical radio woman's voice rang overhead, announcing a quick meeting amongst the present soldiers on the training ground. As Nick led her out of the room and onto the inner grounds of the base, Chell observed the other soldiers spilling out, each a set with their masks on and full uniforms, anonymous faces and voices she was slightly glad she couldn't recognize. Quietly the soldiers grouped together in rigid, trained lines and rows. On a makeshift stage, Chell saw two people " a man and a woman in crisp brown suits (by far the cleanest clothes she'd seen \_anybody\_ wear) " rise up, briefly introducing themselves as the 'Human administrators' of City 26. Standing on the stage with an educated elegance and dignity, the man she'd never seen before, (the word 'Politician' briefly came to mind), reported on the happenings and the effects of their raid on the resistance base.

An estimated two-thirds of the resistance dead; their largest and most valuable base in the city " completely annihilated. It was a quick, efficient, and successful blow against the resistance.

Before him, the people cheered loudly as Chell looked on in silence, her stomach churning uncomfortably. The man hadn't mentioned their casualties.

For some time this \_encouraging\_ speech continued, the soldiers in action rewarded " not with medals, or with money " but with recognition from the Combine, and the honour of being known for what they did.

Slowly, the man on stage recited the names given to him on a list by his 'Secretary'.

"\_Nikolai Rozhkov."\_

Nick visibly straightened as the man turned to him.

"\_Stephen Cooper."\_

Steve stood silently as usual.

"\_Andâ€|"\_ \_For a second the man's eyes flashed to Chell, hesitating. From the top of the mask, the man's eyes traveled instantly down to her odd shoes, and then to the list, as he visibly read and re-read the paper, searching for her name. Around her, the group of civil protection members listened intently, still unaware that anything was wrong.

>Her name missing, and left with no choice but to move on, the man picked up from where he left off, moving quickly across the paper.

<em>"-Julio Castillo, James Markâ€| "<em>

Ever since their return, people had been congratulating them. They had been congratulated for their kills, rewarded for the damage they â€" and along with them, she â€" had done on other people's lives.

They had killed humans, just like them.

>Defenseless, screaming, <em>humans, <em>that could have very well been them.

Yet the men in masks laughed, and they cheered. As if nothing ever happened. As if the blood on the walls and the numerous bodies on the floor didn't matter to them.

They weren't humans. They were monsters.

><em>And she wasn't any different.

Now, as she sat on a worn-out bench outside of the administrator's temporary office, as Nick fought for her right to be properly registered as a member of the Combine, Chell froze, her mind caught on Steve's words.

"\_I'm sorry."\_

Finally, somebody had said something different.

"I wish I could say that it gets better, but to be honest â€" it doesn't," Steve continued, his head hung in what seemed like shame.

"Cruelty â€" the loss of lives is never something you'll find pleasant â€" it's only something you get used to. No one had to die," the man whispered. "You begin to doubt. You question your superior's motives, then you question yourself. And the worst part is that around you, the world doesn't change. It never does. Even when for you, it will never be the same again." Steve sighed.

>"â€|I'm sorry you had to see that," the man said, looking to the woman beside him. "I'm sorry you had to kill the man."<p>

\_I'm sorry.\_

The words repeated in her head as she stared blankly at the other man, her face crumbling quietly underneath the cover of the mask.

>If she could apologize, she would.<p>

For several long moments, there was nothing. A final quietude sunk between the two as they waited for the arrival of Nick â€" the only reason they stayed there.

Finally, after what seemed like hours upon hours of waiting, Nick stepped out the door of the administrator's office, quietly shutting the door behind him as he turned toward the tired two.

"â€|It was a little bit of a trouble to convince Mr. Elite of your worth over there," Nick said teasingly, "â€|But you're now a fully fledged member of the Combine army." Nick chuckled to himself as Chell's breath caught silently underneath her mask, recalling the words he had said the day they first met.

"\_Once you're registered, there's no going back."\_



She was stuck with this forever.

"Thank god they don't need any names." Nick laughed, still talking joyfully to himself. "If they did, they would've had a \_real\_ hard time asking it out from you, girl."

>Walking up to her, he roughly laid a hand on her head. "â€|And if you didn't answer, you could've ended up dead." Nick said quietly. "Thank god you didn't."<p>

"â€|Where are you going?" Steve asked, as Nick began to walk away from the two, his injured and tightly-wrapped right hand waving in the air.

"Unlike some lazy dweebs 'round here, I've still got some actual shit to do!" Nick said over the concealed microphone, his voice sounding loudly inside their masks.

>"Nah man, I'm kidding." Nick laughed as he caught the disapproving silence of Steve. "You bring Daisy to her room and make her rest, okay? If anything, she needs one."<p>

"We all have some \_big\_ game to catch in the next few days." >And with that, Nick quickly left, leaving the two alone in the hallway in silence.<p>

"â€|Well, I suppose we do as we're told, then," Steve murmured as he rose, waiting patiently for Chell to follow.

Wordlessly the two headed for their respective quarters, Steve leading on as he guided her way through the decrepit building.

"I suppose this may be an odd question to ask now butâ€|" Steve said quietly, breaking the silence. "What \_is\_ your name?"

Chell paused, stopping in her tracks as Steve continued. "The thought hadn't occurred to me until Nick mentioned it, but you'd never identified yourself before. Not like I'd ever heard you \_speak \_but â€" you must at least have a \_name \_you can communicate\_, \_right?"

For a second, Chell opened her mouth to reply, the retort; \_"Of course I have a damn name." \_running instinctively through her head. But the moment she tried to recall the said name, nothing â€" absolutely \_nothing \_came up.

>For the longest time she could remember, from the time she had first been awoken in the godforsaken depths of Aperture Science â€" she had always been called by different titles, ranging from the <em>'lady'<em>, the \_'test subject'\_, to even \_'fat, parent-less adopted monster'\_. But never, not even once, had GLaDOS or Wheatley â€" or anybody else for that matter â€" called her by her 'name'.

If she had a name, she couldn't remember it.

Quietly, Chell shut her mouth, and shook her head.

Under the mask, Steve looked at the girl in surprise.

>"â€|I'm sorry to hear that." He murmured apologetically.<p>

\_No. \_Chell shook her head again in reply. \_Don't be.\_

Again, the two continued their walked in silence, the static voice of the radio and their footsteps the only sounds to break the monotonous quietude.

"-Hey lady," Steve spoke again, unable to stand the awkward quiet for too long. "I hope you don't mind us â€" mostly Nick, but still â€" \_us\_ for giving you a name."

From her spot in front of him, Chell turned around, tilting her head lightly to the side.

\_What do you mean?\_

"Nick â€" he often calls you \_'Daisy', \_right?"

Chell nodded, recognizing that nickname as her own.

"Ach, I figured he would." Steve threw his hands up, rolling his eyes to the ceiling from underneath his mask. "I told him not to, but I knew he'd never listen."

\_What about it? \_Chell thought as she folded her arms over her chest at his exasperated reaction. She didn't see what was so \_wrong \_about the name that he had to act like that. She didn't mind it, on the contrary actually; she rather liked the name.  
>'<em>Daisy'.<em> The word reminded her of something she once knew, long before.

"Well," Steve hesitantly continued as he saw her reaction. "It's not like it's a \_bad \_thing, just â€"

From under the mask, Chell pointedly stared at him as she impatiently tapped her foot.

\_Get to the point.\_

"Um, well," Steve faltered, "the reason isn't somethingâ€| I can exactly tell you with this mask on. It's â€" personal." He said quietly into the mic, tapping lightly on the hard mask that concealed it.

Undeterred by his reply and now curious, Chell promptly unlatched her white gas mask, expectantly looking at Steve to do the same.

\_Anything to keep a conversation going, right?\_

Tiredly, Steve sighed, hesitating slightly before following her example. Though he knew he couldn't keep Nick's secrets hidden forever, the thought of telling her \_right now\_, (and the possible consequences that could come of it), still made him slightly uncomfortable.

>If Nick ever found out about this, he would definitely be in for a beating.<p>

"â€|Okay," Steve cleared his voice as he warily returned Chell's expectant gaze. "Let me make this very blunt. Daisy," Steve said, forcing himself to look the girl in her eyes. "You were saved â€" as a replacement for Nick's daughter."

For a second, the words didn't click.

>Blankly, Chell stared at the man before her, unable to comprehend his message. The moment it <em>did</em> hit, a numb, silent surprise coursed through her brain.

"\_Adopted.\_"

For a second, that one, odd word she had always been hearing in Aperture popped up in her mind. Slowly, almost clumsily, she nodded in reply.

Now that she thought of herself in that context, several things â€" little, tiny actions of fondness Nick showed toward her â€" began to make some sense.

"Danielle Rozhkov," Steve murmured, his head bowed low in solemnity. "That was her full name. She was a good kid, intelligent, stubborn, though a littleâ€" \_frail. \_She was always sick â€" delicate, you could say â€" like her mother. â€" She didn't last long in this new world." Slowly, Steve looked up, avoiding Chell's curious gaze.

>"Of course, when the invasion began, Nick had expected the worst â€" we all did." Steve sighed. "Tessâ€" Nick's wife was already lost before we could get to her â€" wiped out by a bomb originally meant to kill the enemy<em>.</em> By some miracle, Danielle was spared from deathâ€" but by the time we'd got to her, she'd already lost everything else. Third and second degree burns covered large areas on both of her legs, disabling her from escaping the building we found her in â€" the burnt remains of what was once her elementary school. Underneath the rubble and the black bodies of her once-classmates, she'd been crying for hours, hidden from both the rescue team sent by the government, and the aliens they were fighting against. It was by pure, dumb chance that we even spotted her." His hazy eyes gazing blankly ahead, Nick paused. "â€" I lost everything that day. My friends, my familyâ€" even my future. But then again, most of us did. And yet, somehow, Nick hadn't. Even on the day of our downfall, he still had \_her\_. And he \_lived\_ for her. In a way, he always had. To protect her, he did the only thing he was good at â€" he fought. To ensure her safety, he enlisted in the Combine. The man gave everything he had â€" his name for the sake of a code of numbers, his humanity for the sake of a secure home and medical treatment. If he could, he would've sold his soul to save her. He would've given up his mind, his own \_memories\_. She was everything he still had left in this world. And in a way, she was for me, too." Steve sighed quietly.

"â€" I could've left them â€" I \_should\_ have, the moment I knew what he planned on doing. I had more resolve than he did â€" \_I\_ knew what was going to happen. And yetâ€" I still can't forget the day she died. I'd tried to forget that, many, many times. I'd tried to forget \_her\_, \_for years on end. But in my memories, that one image remains clear." Steve said, his quiet, detached tone almost unsettling in Chell's ears.

>"I watched quietly, that day in her resting quarter. Leaning on the wall by the far end of the room â€" it took a lot for me to stay there, without faltering or leaving. On the bed, the girl just lay there, silently. Unmoving, like a doll. She had been 'sleeping' like that for almost two days now. By the side of her bed, her father â€" Nick had been coaxing her to wake up for hours on end. Tiredly, the doctor beside him shook his head. By that time, she had already long

past gone, quietly slipped away by a pandemic that only affected children of her age. She was always rather, <em>fragile</em>, in comparison to the other kids."

For a moment, Steve lapsed into silence, the two walking slowly along the long, dim hallway that led to their base.  
>Unable to find the words to reply, unable to find the will to say she was sorry, Chell looked down, gradually regretting her decision to hear Steve's story.<p>

"â€|She looked a lot like you, Daisy." Steve began again, his eyes still trained on the ground before him. "She acted a lot like you, too. If she'd grown up, she could've been exactly like you now." Steve sighed. "Working with her beloved father on the same field. The same goddamned job she despised, yet her father seemed to love to be a part of. For as long as I'd known him, that man was never fully sane. He was a violent sociopath, a natural, homicidal, sadist from the time I'd first met him. He was all that â€" and now, he's delusional. By putting her name on you, by treating you as if he would her, he's trying to act â€" he's trying to pretend as if Danielle's still alive," Steve muttered, disgusted. "He sees the truth â€" he knows what we both do, but he refuses to acknowledge it. He doesn't care about who you really are, he doesn't care about where you really come from â€" to him, you were Danielle, from the very start. The moment he realizes any different â€" he will most likely obliterate you. Make it out as if you never even existed. As if you were never even there. And if the dog ever dares bite its master's hand â€" if the dog ever fails to follow to its master's order, wellâ€| I suppose that's when the end arrives."

Outside, the sun doused the once-blue sky in a cherry red, staining the walls and floors, the sunlight's last rays graced down upon in a curious mixture of light and shadow. Where the small, barren windows of the base decorated the empty hall, a fading, red light danced around the area, the only shadows cast by the two quietly making their way across the building. Finally they were nearing their destination.

Worriedly, Chell looked up to Steve. The story â€" his whole account of the name 'Daisy', had taken a gradual dark turn on the atmosphere that surrounded the two, and Steve's own, often submissive attitude. Silently, she nudged him for reassurance.

"â€|Of course, Nick isn't all bad," Steve said, mistaking Chell's nervous gaze as worry for herself. "The man isâ€|kind, when he wants to be. In a way, everything he's done so far â€" he's done it to assure your safety." Weakly, Steve smiled. "All he wants is for you to be safe. Don'tâ€|be afraid, of him. However crazy the man is, he knows well enough of what he's doing. You can trust him. And though I do doubt him, time and time again, the man hasn't failed in his mission. He never has. I was saved too, twenty years ago, from the pits of Black Mesa, and I'm still here. Trust me," Steve said quietly as he stopped by a door â€" the entrance to Chell's own quarters. "Trust him. He only wants what you want the most."

"He only wants you to live."

~oOo~

Quietly, as Chell lazily gazed on at the barren ceiling from the

comfort of her (hard) bed, she reflected on what she had just heard.

The life and death of a little girl â€" just like her. A girl who â€" in some other, happier world â€" may have been loved, cherished by both her father and mother, treasured 'till the end of time.

Quietly, hazily, a song began to form in her head.

\_Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do  
><em>\_I'm half crazy  
><em>\_All for the love of you\_

'\_Daisy'.\_ She finally remembered where she heard that word.

Sitting up from where she lay, Chell stared blankly at the wall.

\_If anything,\_ Chell thought, \_today was a weird day.\_

A lot of things happened that she didn't yet want to reflect back on, and she'd heard a lot of things â€" stories and memories of people she didn't know what to do with just yet. She could write about it, she supposed, (that was, if she still remembered how to write), but first, there were other things she needed to do.

Quietly, Chell left her quarters and stepped back out in the bland, concrete hallway. Leaving her mask on the bed, (she never really did like that odd thing, anyway), she flitted quickly past the doors of the other rooms, going once down the stairs in search of Steve's room number.

First things first â€" the man had actually helped her.  
>The dark skinned, bald, weird, quiet person she hadn't really liked before had actually <em>helped<em> her. He'd taught her how to cope, and he'd given her a reason to trust people. To trust them.  
>And it seemed, he trusted her, too.<p>

For the first time she could remember since Wheatley had \_changed\_, she wanted to show gratitude. She wanted to say "Thank you."

For a time, moments passed on with her walking quietly through the silent hall, each closed room seemingly empty and abandoned if not for the occasional sound of footsteps, or the small, cackling hum of music from a personal radio. Soon, she'd arrived at her destination. Before her, the door to Steve's room lay tightly closed.  
>As Chell walked slowly, quietly towards it, she could faintly hear the voices.<p>

"\_This isâ€|base City 26â€|we have received your message."\_

"\_Affirmativeâ€|White Forest baseâ€|we areâ€|Go ahead."\_

Steve's own, quiet voice, and a static-filled, different voice Chell couldn't quite recognize.

"â€|\_massacre of 58 menâ€|all othersâ€|evacuated toâ€|station. Huntersâ€|other protection members have gatheredâ€|for assault on station. Aloneâ€|they won't make it. Send troops from White

Forestâ€|thisâ€|an emergency." \_

"â€|\_Understood." \_

Cautiously, Chell opened the door.

His back faced toward her, Steve sat on a desk by the far end of the room, his right hand gripped on a microphone, the electrical cords underneath connected to a small, dual screened device that displayed the faces of two people â€" a black-haired man in a worn out civil protection uniform, and a timid looking, aged Caucasian man in spectacles and a white lab coat. By his left hand a small radio sat, a round, orange engraving by the side of the device. A clear, small logo Chell had come to despise over the course of the past day.

"\_Oh my." \_The elderly scientist instinctively cupped his mouth as he noticed the girl at the door.

The logo of the resistance.

## 10. Melting Point

\_Authors Note: Welp, I think I'm officially the \*fastest\* (quote quote) writer in the goddamn world. \_

\_Sarcasm aside, I've been REALLY busy with my exams and assignments and stuff as of late, (sadly a little too busy for my hobbies) but I'm back! And I'll be writing up stock chapters while my spring break lasts. I can't promise anything (don't trust me if I do), but hopefully I won't have another break THIS long from this story while it lasts. If you want to monitor my process (or creepily internet-stalk me) I've also created a Tumblr account where I'll be posting updates of my several projects, (including this fic) and SFM posters (and a possible animated video) for this particular story. The link is on my account page, if you're interested.\_

\_So guys, I hope you enjoy this Half-point chapter, and bear with me 'till the end of this rapidly growing story.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Alyx checked and re-checked the ammo of her shotgun as she toyed around with her familiar hacking devices, several of the limited number of tools she had been allowed to bring into Aperture.<p>

Her preparations finished, she idly looked to her left as Igor, the assigned medic of the team, slung his backpack over his shoulder. In the bag were several 'precautionary' items they were told they 'absolutely \_wouldn't\_ be safe without' â€" in which included a small collection of medical kits, grenades, and gasmasks.

>Why they would even <em>need<em> to bring any of those objects, (particularly the gasmasks), in a \_supposedly\_ completely untouched and abandoned facility was a mystery to Alyx. But Doug had insisted, and she hadn't worried enough to question him. Not just yet, at least.

Catching her gaze, Igor turned to her and nodded. He was ready.

At his cue, Alyx glanced to the far side of the large teleportation

room. By the assortment of monitors near the teleportation device, Gordon and Uriah stood, the two having a rather one-sided conversation with the Aperture scientist, Doug Rattmann, who had chosen to stay behind.

On the other side of the screen, under the protection of the white forest base, Doug explained the mechanics of the miniature transmission device he had created along with the other engineers. Its shape akin to that of a small wristwatch, the small screen on the top of the wristband, (supposedly where the time would've been shown, had it been a normal watch), displayed Doug's face, who had been anxiously glimpsing back and forth from the transmitter camera to the big screen.

Though merely nothing more than a slightly advanced walkie-talkie, the miniature transmitter was a pretty handy device, allowing Doug to survey the surrounding area along with the search party, and give directions when necessary.

"Most importantly," he'd added, an unmistakable tinge of paranoia to his words "The radio waves used in this device aren't familiar to Her. The 20 year blank came with its penalties, it seems. As long as we keep out of Her eyes, She shouldn't be able to hear us."

Whoever this 'She' was, Doug was quite clearly terrified of her. Though who it actually was, or what it actually could be in a and she couldn't strengthen this enough " facility abandoned for 20 years was an absolute mystery.

Now, useful as the transmitter was, only the two humans of the search party, (Alyx and Igor), had been given the device. Uriah had pointedly denied, strongly objecting to the notion of having mechanical bonds strapped around his arm " it apparently reminded him a tad too much of the period of enslavement of his kind. Instead, the third watch had been given to Gordon, who had been ordered to go to the City 26 base by Dr. Kleiner, for the lone fact the he " of the two humans and vortiguant that made up the search party " was the only person who still remembered how to drive a car.

No, though undoubtedly a fact that would surprise many people, Gordon was not part of the search party.

But why he wasn't part, Doug had explained to an objecting crowd of honestly-maybe-a-little biased group of scientists, was for very good reason.

Aperture despised Black Mesa.

>Even after 20 years of its destruction, that still remained a fact of life.<p>

Before the downfall, during Aperture's financial crisis, many bad rumors of Black Mesa circulated around the company " stories of stealing information, bribery of the police, unorthodox safety and radioactive waste management policies, as well as terrible tales of betrayal and unconventional headhunting methods following in its wake. GLaDOS was created, not only as an operating system to manage the testing facilities, but as a means to overlook the whole company, and of course, its security measures. It would be an understatement to say that they displayed a little bit of unlawful liberty in

creating her " arming her with weapons, satellite control, and an (almost) complete, real time record of all known Black Mesa employees, including those who had just newly entered and the interns " all up to the year the facility came crumbling down.

|Which would incidentally end up as the same year the rest of humanity would come to its downfall as well.

Either way, Aperture had decided to go through \_extreme\_ measures to prevent stealing from ever happening again. GLaDOS's many unused, but still prevalent, functions included the automatic recognition and destruction of \_all\_ foreign and unwanted Black Mesa employees, including, but not limited to, the Fast, Ubiquitous Charcoalization Karmatic care, and the Yperite Orderly Uninhibition protection system, as well as several others the team could \_very\_ \_easily\_ imagine.

So, crossing off all direct employees of Black Mesa, (Gordon, Kleiner, Magnusson, Barney), crossing off all the people who were most likely prone to getting easily angered and a \_little\_ too fond destroying things they shouldn't be touching, (machine-gun Cindy, a rather unsettlingly large number of the other resistance members), and including only the ones who could calmly follow orders and were willing to enter the depths of the unknown, Doug considered those he knew he could trust, and proposed the following three members: Alyx, Igor, and Uriah.

In the end, these were the two people, (and vortigunt), assigned to the search of the Aperture Handheld Portal Device.

Now, as the newly-shaven and noticeably \_cleaner\_ Doug Rattmann finished his little informative speech, Alyx coughed quietly from behind the two facing the screen, successfully catching their attention.

"We're ready," she said, nodding towards Igor behind her. "I suppose it's time to go now. We don't really have much time to waste."

"\_Ah, okay," \_Doug replied, his voice fizzing faintly from beyond the monitor screen. \_"You remember the directions to the shack I gave you, right? In the wheat fields?"\_

"Yup. No problem at all," Alyx replied nonchalantly, nudging Gordon and the others out the door.

"\_Great. Contact me when you get there, I'll give you further instructions then."\_

"Gotcha." Alyx nodded. "See you later, Doug, we'll catch you at the drop off point."

\* \* \*

><p>"Now that it was all said and done, the team arranged, the team successfully teleported to the resistance base " and he'd heard about their terrible luck, (specifically Dr. Gordon Freeman's), with those clunky teleporters " the next step they had to take was to get there. Once they did, getting into Aperture and finding the portal gun should be easy"  
<br>That was, at least, until they needed to escape.



And escaping, Doug knew, was when the real battle would begin.

In the safety of the White Forest base, Doug Rattmann quietly cut the video feed, relaxing back into his wooden chair.

If he could be wholly honest with himself, he would've felt relieved that he wouldn't be going back into Aperture, back into the clutches of the forsaken facility he'd tried to escape from for so long.

>But unfortunately for him, he wasn't *that* *honest*, and he'd let the team go with mixed feelings.

Doug knew, more than anything, that their safety was up to him. He, of all people, was the only one who still knew the pass codes and the back areas, the threats of the deep and the hidden, dark corners even Her eyes couldn't reach â€" he was their key to getting out alive.

And this time, he knew he wasn't going to let anyone die down there, alone in the depths of Aperture.

Beside him, Dr. Kleiner set up his own feed, apparently contacting another resistance base from the same location the search party was now in. A suburban area-based resistance branch this time, the initial contact request came from an odd place, (which Doug was pretty sure never existed before), called City 26.

Apparently, their mandatory status report was late.

>For whatever reason, they were one of the last to give the main branch an update on their base.<p>

Idly, Doug looked on as Barney, (whom he had first met via transmission feed several hours before), popped up on screen, connecting the City 26 resistance base to the White Forest communication system.

The man was rather young, (or so he seemed), with dark hair, and a blue and white military-esque uniform covering the top of his torso, the limit to which Doug could see from the monitor screen. He was a cheery man, as far as Doug knew him, always upbeat, even in the dullest of situations, (and trust him, there was never anything duller to a stranger than a group of scientists discussing quantum physics).

>Apparently, prior to his role as an important resistance leader and connector between bases, the man acted as a double-spy for the resistance, working underneath the Combine government, in an armed force known as the 'Civil Protection'.<p>

Though, dramatic as his tale seemed, stories like his were apparently 'just normal' in the Cities. How that could be possible, Doug didn't know.

Of a majority of the tales he'd heard from his fellow scientists, many came from recent events in a place called City 17. A place of seemingly never-ending terror, armed combat and futile resistance against aliens of all life forms, Doug had come to realize how fortunate he was to have met the resistance before anybody else.

>Under this strict dictatorship of extraterrestrial beings, and this

unending war of humanity and survival, he had had the luck to discover the right people to trust first.<p>

“It was odd, to say the least, to picture other cities he might have once known, under these same conditions.

So when the dark-skinned, bespectacled bald man in uniform first came out on screen, Doug was nothing less than surprised.

"\_This is the resistance base City 26, we have received your message."\_

For a second, Dr. Kleiner frowned slightly, his discomfort apparent on his usually kindly face.

Dr. Kleiner knew, as much the other man \_should\_ have, that spies shouldn't be contacting the central resistance base under any circumstances. To be found while sharing information would be a high price to pay for both parties, and what they contacted each other for was almost never worth the risk of being exposed “ simple updates in particular.

That was “ unless something had gone \_terribly\_ wrong.

"“Affirmative," Dr. Kleiner returned, nervously fidgeting with his spectacles. "The White Forest base acknowledges your transmission. We are listening, go ahead."

"“" For a moment the dark-skinned man paused, as if carefully thinking of what to say next. \_“As much as I regret to have to inform this to you, the resistance base of City 26 ceases to exist any longer. To the extent of my knowledge, I am the only resistance member still situated in City 26. All others are dead, or have already escaped to the nearest outpost."\_

At the weight of those words, a dull pang of shock hit the group of resistance members. Listening by the side, Doug unconsciously covered a hand over his mouth.

"But how“?" Dr. Kleiner replied hesitantly, questioning the man as calmly as he could.

"\_There was a successful 'hunting' today “ two of my colleagues had discovered a resistance member while he was delivering the first batch of new weapons to the central resistance base, and they tracked him “ he led the two straight into the base." \_The bespectacled man looked down briefly, as if bowing his head in shame.\_ "“I couldn't stop them. I'm sorry," \_he murmured quietly. \_"Caught by surprise, what followed after was a massacre of 58 men “ two-thirds of the resistance members in City 26. Everyone else evacuated to the nearest outpost, the forest base accessible through the wheat fields surrounding the City. They should be safe for now but“" \_the man fumbled quietly.

"“\_They don't have much time left. The Civil Protection has recently found traces of human activity near the wheat fields, and they plan on investigating it. With the escaped resistance members and the heightened tension within the City after the downfall of City 17, the hunt for survivors is bound to begin very soon. Hunters and a

large number of other protection members have gathered for an assault on the forest station, and from what I've heard, they plan to jump at them while they are still weak and recovering from their last attack." \_The man paused, breathing in deeply before continuing. \_"Aloneâ€|they won't make it. Resistance base City 26 requests you to send troops from the White Forest base as fast as possible. This is an emergency."\_

Quietly, Doug's eyes drifted from the screen to Dr. Kleiner's face, where the scientist seemed to be considering his proposition very seriously.

Though the dark-skinned resistance member hid his emotions under a stoic mask, anyone who heard his words could tell â€" the man was desperate.

"â€|Understood," Dr. Kleiner finally replied. "We'll send in back-up troops as fast as possible."

For a flash of a moment, the man's face lightened up, and he almost gave in to a relieved sighâ€"

>-Had it not been for the door that had opened quietly behind him.<p>

â€|It only took a second.

Doug quietly slumped back on his chair, an overwhelming feeling of numbness and disbelief hitting him hard from the sudden recognition of the woman who had just entered the bespectacled man's room.

\_No...noâ€|that can't possibly be right.\_

"â€|Oh my," Dr. Kleiner gasped quietly, his hand covering his mouth in surprise.

\_I know that face. I \_know \_her.\_

"\_Wha- Daisy?!"\_ From beyond the video feed the undercover civil protection member spun back as he exclaimed, his shock clearly visible from the tone of his wavering voice.

Previously rock-still, the girl who had crept up from behind the man flinched visibly at the sound of her name, the clear alarm in her eyes betraying her stoic silence as she took a step backwards from the exit of his room, and turned to run.

Before Doug could exclaim, before he could even get the chance to confirm his thoughts, a frantic, incoherent voice, (the man's voice â€" there was no doubt about it), came from beyond the screen, and the video transmission was abruptly cut off. On the screen, the video feed had been reduced to a dull green background, and centered on it the words: \_'connection failed'\_.

The worried commotion of the scientists surrounded Doug as he continued to sit there, paralyzed by the noise of his own whirling thoughts.

For the first time in what felt like days of silence, the Companion Cube had spoken up.

Quietly, it whispered to him, its voice riddled with uncertainty and the undoubtable weight of something \_real\_.

"\_That wasâ€¦|Chell."\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>[Sector 1, City 26, 6:42 PM]<em>

It was odd, maybe, Chell reflected as she blindly ran down the hall in panic from her supposed \_friend's \_room, how one part of her brain could so clearly and calmly reflect on the time of day while every other part of her was screaming profanities and hell bloody murder.

\_No. NO. I can't believe it! Why-why the hell was he talking with the enemy?

><em>\_That fucking traitor!\_

The calm part of her rationalized with her anger. She obviously should've known something like this was going to happen, one day or another. Somehow, it always did. Every time she decided to trust someone, they'd turned out to be her enemies, out to get her, or just have generally terrible personalities. It seemed she was always a bad judge of character.

\_But stillâ€¦|\_ Chell thought as she ran, painfully gulping down tears of shock. \_Selling us out when I finally get the courage to go out and say 'Thanks for all you've done'? You've gotta be kidding me.

><em>\_What a great way to break someone's trust.\_

"Daisy! Wait!"

Behind her, Steve yelled breathlessly as he chased after the girl, running clumsily out of his room. In his panic, he'd cut off the video feed to the white forest base, but he hadn't shut the door.

As they ran down the, (thankfully), empty hallway, it wasn't long before the deceptively faster Steve caught up to Chell's nimble strides.

"Daisy, come on!" Steve said breathlessly as he stopped her in her tracks, roughly tugging her left arm to face him. "Listen to me, I-"

\_No. \_Chell whipped around, raggedly elbowing him in the face. Quietly, she heard something crack, and Steve toppled slightly, covering a hand to his injured nose as it began to bleed profusely.

Her enemy preoccupied, Chell turned quickly back to escape. But by the moment she realized where she was, it was all too late.

She'd been herded, led straight into the wall. There was no place left for her to run.

In front of her, Steve shakily wiped the blood off his nose, and with a blank, almost surprised gaze, he looked up to meet her eyes.

Slowly, menacingly, he took a step towards her.

And gently, he set a hand on her arm.

"Daisy â€" I don't want to harm you."

Chell sneered quietly at those words, almost ready to spit on his face and make a run for it.

\_Yeah, right. Like I'm SO gullible to believe anything you say right after \_I see you selling us out to the enemy. Fuck, I never should've trusted you!\_

"I-I know you must think that I've betrayed you," Steve fumbled on, "and I have, I know that myself. I'm not denying it to you. But what I did, I did because I needed to."

"â€|Daisy, there's more than just our lives at stake here. There's more to this place than just 'protecting the people' from resistance terrorists, and defeating the 'bad guys', whatever Nick might say to you. So \_please\_, " Steve pleaded on as Chell's resolve slowly began to crumble. "Please, listen to me. I can't let \_them\_ â€" I can't let the Combine take anymore lives away. We've already lost too many lives in this war, and Iâ€|" Steve faltered. "I was never even able to save one."

Quietly, Chell looked down at the man she once thought was her friend, her bout of anger quickly faltering and dissolving into a dark pit of confusion and pity. Steve was an utter mess. And in a way, she was too.

Something was happening to her resolve, and though a stubborn, angry part of her still said that the only thing she ought to do was to shake the weak, crumbling man off her arm and run off to warn somebody about the traitor â€" Nick, without a doubt â€" she also knew that she couldn't do it. In a weird way, he was still a friend. Somewhere in her heart, she still trusted him, and she still believed in him. At least, she \_wanted\_ to believe in him. After all, that was what friends were for, weren't they? And she couldn't just kick a friend awayâ€|right?

In the end, Chell chose to stay.

His grip weak on her shoulders, Steve bowed his head.

>"â€|All I did was to give them a way to fight. I couldn't let them free â€" they had no other place to run. But now, they at least have a chance." Tiredly, almost as if in pain, Steve looked up.<p>

"Daisy, we've already killed 58 men," he said quietly. "Don't you think that's quite enough?"

Paralyzed, conflicted, Chell couldn't find the heart in her to say no.

"All I'm asking of youâ€"" Steve continued. "All I'm \_begging \_you to do is to keep this quiet to the others, to \_Nick\_."

Chell flinched.

"-at least, until this 'hunt' is over. When everything is over, when it's all said and done, then you can say the truth. I already know what's going to happen to me if they find out. And even if you don't say it, the Combine will discover the truth, sooner or later. They're not stupid. And I know that. I'm prepared...Please, Daisy. I'm doing this for a bigger cause. It's not only my life at stake here. You know that fact, as well as I do. There were over 80 men in that resistance base, all of whom relied on me, believed in me to keep them alive, to keep them one step ahead of us. And I failed them. I can't fail again."

Desperation glinting in Steve's eyes, he looked up to Chell for the last time. "You of all people should know the weight of a life."

Chell's resolve crumbled.

But before she could look away, before she could even choose to nod or shake her head, the familiar rustling of quiet footsteps, and the loud, obnoxious static of an unknown masked protection member's voice rang in her ears. Her eyes widening, Chell looked over Steve's shoulder.

"\_Hey! You two over there! What the hell are you guys doing?"\_

Standing in the middle of the hallway, the man stood, waving at the two as he slowly approached them from the opposite side of the hall.

In a numb, detached, distant part of Chell's brain, the hourly alarm of the radio clock chimed, and she could hear the cold, static voice of an unknown female announcer.

\_[Sector 1, City 26, 7:00 PM]\_

The hour when the day shift ended, and the men posted nearest to the base returned quickly, flitting restlessly back to their dorm.

"\_Seriously, man, have the decency to go get a fucking room, will ya? Not everyone here brings their fucking girlfriend to work with them-"\_

In Chell's head, she could hear the echoing footsteps of several other people on the hard, bare concrete, and the faint laughter of men she didn't recognize.

"\_-What's this?"\_

The masked man looked into the haphazardly opened door of Steve's room, walking quietly in, and then out of the lonely dormitory room door Steve had left ajar in his panic. For a moment, the man was silent.

Then in an instant, he quickly snapped out his beating stick, and lunged at Steve.

\_Crack.\_

â€|It only took a second.

\* \* \*

><p>"â€|<em>Ahem, test test."<em>

As Dr. Kleiner's voice echoed from the small screen strapped to his wrist, Gordon tapped it idly, wondering exactly where the engineers had thought of hiding a tiny little camera on such a tiny little video transmission device.

"\_Well hello, Gordon, I'm pleased to see you've made it to the entrance of the facility." \_Dr. Kleiner smiled pleasantly, noticing the wheat fields and the small, barren shack behind Gordon's position. \_"Oh and do please stop fiddling around with the device, Gordon, your finger is obscuring my view."\_

\_Ah. \_Gordon nodded. \_I guess the camera's on top of the screen then.\_

"Well, Dr. Kleiner? You suppose it's alright for us to get in the shack already?" Alyx asked as she popped up beside Gordon, the other two members of the search party still leaning over the car, (or what was left of it), and feeling sick after Gordon's so-called 'driving' experience, (which in many instances would be more comparable to car abuse than actual driving).

"\_I don't see why not? Time is of the essence in all missions, but in particular, this assignment," \_Dr. Kleiner spoke as his expression turned grave. \_"I fear that there may be another battle on the horizon, possibly very near, if not on your exact location."\_

"Huh." Alyx nodded. "Gotcha."

"\_It should be several days before the enemy will begin their attack," \_Dr Kleiner scratched his chin, \_"But I doubt we can rely on our 'friend' in the enemy lines to keep us updated for much longer. He's been discovered."\_

Alyx's eyebrows rose, a small expression of surprise briefly running through her face. "How long do we have left?"

"\_Unfortunately we do not know. But you must get out of there before the battle begins," \_Dr. Kleiner said with a stern expression. \_"We're relying on you, Alyx, to complete the objective, as quickly and as safely as possible."\_

"I understand," Alyx replied.

"\_Oh, and Gordon," \_Dr. Kleiner said, turning to the other man, \_"If you may, please stay at your post until further instructions have been given. If need be, you may have to fend off the Combine from post 26 while we send in the back-up troops."\_

Gordon nodded.

Behind him, Alyx kneeled on the grass, touching around the edges of what seemed like the door to the shack, feeling around for a button, or a lever.

After several seconds of searching, a faint \_click\_ sounded from within the building, and a white, almost pristine keyboard and screen slid out from a cleverly hidden crevice in the wall. On the device's screen where the dull orange words; \_please enter your username and password here.\_

"Got it." Alyx grinned to herself.

Swiftly, her fingers flew across the keyboard, inputting the username and password she had been given to prior to her departure by the Aperture scientist, Doug Rattmann.

```
_Username: test_subject  
><em>_Password: thr_wll_b_c4k3_
```

After a small pause the codes disappeared, and the screen flashed a dark green.

```
_Welcome to Aperture Science: Test Subject__
```

In a second, the screen and keyboard slid back into its hidden crevice, and in front of Alyx, the previously closed door opened slowly, revealing a small, clean space of a room illuminated with a single light above it, and a glass, odd-looking elevator as it opened its doors with a cheery sounding \_'ding'\_.

Step number 1: getting into the facility, check.

"â€|Hmm, that was easy. Maybe even a little too easy," Igor the medic mumbled sluggishly as he appeared behind Alyx, a hand still clutching his emptied stomach. "I wonder if Mr. Rattmann's got anything to say about this."

"He \_is \_there, isn't he Dr. Kleiner? He hasn't spoken a word to us yet."

"\_Wellâ€|"\_ Dr. Kleiner faltered. \_"It seems he is a littleâ€|'hard-hit', you might say, by what he saw in the transmission we received earlier."\_

"Ah, you mean the SOS message you received from City 26?" Igor inquired. "The spy who got caught?"

"\_Precisely." \_Dr. Kleiner nodded. \_"I suppose he didn't know what to expect. Poor ladâ€| he must have had a home there, once. He's been displayingâ€| slightly 'odd' behavior, since he viewed the transmission."\_

"Huh? What do you mean, odd behavior?" Igor asked, a natural, altruistic part of his personality popping up at the mention of a friend's problem.

"â€|\_Well, 'anxious' may be the most fitting term. Maybe 'paranoid', even." \_Dr. Kleiner looked away nervously. \_"He's beenâ€| talking to himself."\_

\_Oh. \_Gears clicked in Igors head at those words, little bothersome thoughts and tiny details he'd noticed of the Aperture scientist piecing up and forming a larger picture.



\_Oh no.\_

"â€|So what you're saying is that he \_can't \_talk to us now." Alyx said flatly from beside Igor, impatiently tapping her foot. "That's fine, we can just contact him later when we need his directions. First things first, let's not waste anymore time."

"Come on, guys." Alyx pointed towards the elevator. "The door's been open for some time now."

Igor, an odd, mortified look on his face, didn't reply. Behind him, the Vortiguant, Uriah, nodded slightly, speaking up for the first time in their conversation.

"I am of the same mind as â€" we have not time to waste."

Gratefully, Alyx smiled in agreement. Herding the two into the elevator, she too stepped in, turning back once to look at Gordon and the transmission of Dr. Kleiner, still watching her supportively from Gordon's strapped wrist.

"See ya later, Gordon." She waved at him. "See ya too, Dr. Kleiner. Hopefully the next time I have another \_lengthy \_conversation with you, it'll be in the flesh."

Quietly, Dr, Kleiner chuckled. \_"Good luck, you three."\_

As the heavy door shut before them with a quiet, final \_click, \_as the three squished tightly into the small, confined space that was never meant to fit three people, (or at least, two people and an alien), as Alyx idly noticed Igor pale quietly, and the elevator begin its swift descent, she thought she heard one last quiet sentence. Though where it came from, though \_who\_ it came from, she never could quite tell.

"\_May the odds be ever in your favour, Ms. Vance."\_

\* \* \*

><p>A disturbance in the dark.<p>

Amongst the thousands, maybe millions, of small yellow lights glowing in the dark, one small bulb flashed red, blinking frantically in the dim, cool room of endless monitor screens.

From staring tiredly at the countless test runs of the recurrently-failing cooperative imbeciles of her creation, GLaDOS idly snaked her large 'head' to the source of the disturbance: \_camera #36\_.

"\_I swear by the name of Science, if you don't to show me anything worthwhile, I \_will \_personally take it upon you to destroy yourself and every one of your back-ups," \_GLaDOS growled quietly at the beeping system.

The blinking red light faded, and above it, a small, dusty monitor blinked into life.

Slowly, the crevice of GLaDOS's optic widened, and with it, the

feeling of a faint, intangible tingling of anticipation running through millions of electrical neurons in her digital brain.

If GLaDOS could, she would've smiled.

\_It's been a long time.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"â€|<em>And such has been the legacy of our world-renowned dietary repulsion gel."<em>

For the several minutes since the descent began, Alyx, Igor, and Uriah stood together in awkward silence, nobody really sure what to say about the tight, uncomfortable space between them, or the blaring, cheery voice of an unknown male announcer that had been spewing random, (and rather curious), facts of Aperture history since the ride had begun. If the thought of going far down the surface of the earth without any more support than the help of the other two people in their team, and the one scientist they \_still \_didn't know they could trust, was bad enough, the faint, annoying elevator jazz that had also been playing behind the announcer's voice ever since god-knows-when was just making matters worse.

In each person's mind, their own thoughts were spinning. Tension built up between them, and a suffocating feeling of nausea was soon replacing even the curiosity of seeing what was inside the illusive Aperture facility. But even amongst the anxious three, the voices in Igor's head were brewing a storm.

\_Now it makes sense.\_

That one thought echoed in the medic's mind louder than any other, and the more he thought about his predicament, and the scientist, Doug Rattmann, the less he knew he wanted to be here. Down underground, where his only reliable means of escape was to trust the scientist who'd been there before him.

The paranoid, \_schizophrenic \_scientist.

\_Ugh.\_ He mentally slapped himself.

><em>My career experience at the pharmacy was a goddamn joke. To think that I'd finally understood what his 'request' meant, to think that I'd only remembered what 'Ziprasidone' actually was, <em>right\_ after I stepped in to the point of no return.\_

Nervously massaging his temple, Igor inhaled deeply. \_Just. Great.\_

Beside him, Alyx noticed idly as her wristwatch flashed into life, and Doug Rattmann's pale face, (paler than usual?), blinked on screen.

"â€|\_You've made it in. Good, good." \_Doug said shakily, his breath slightly catching on his words.

Alyx raised an eyebrow. "Are you okay?"

"\_M-me? I'm fine, why would you ask that?" \_Doug replied a little too quickly.

"â€|Well okay then." Alyx shrugged nonchalantly. "As long as you don't go freaking out on us when we need you to be calm, then we should be \_completely\_ fine."

Doug let out a weak chuckle. \_"I justâ€| came here to warn you," \_Doug started quietly. \_"I can't talk much right now, under Her eyes. Luckily, she can't hear us in here, but I know she's watching. She always is. If you show her any sign that I'm here, she may try to kill you on the spot."\_

"Wait â€" Mr. Rattman, I mean â€" Doug," Alyx stuttered. "Who exactly \_is \_this 'She' you've been talking about? \_What \_is this 'She'? Is it a threat?"

"\_That isâ€|hard to explain, actually. Sorry, I'm running out of time. But, well, you'll meet her, soon enough." \_Doug shrugged, his finger itching to end the transmission as fast as possible. \_"Oh, but to answer your last question, She is \_definitely \_a threat. Whatever you do, \_do not\_ believe a word she says."\_

And with that, Doug abruptly cut the feed, leaving Alyx to mutter crossly at an empty monitor screen.

"â€|Goddamnit, Doug, what do you mean, 'soon enough?! That doesn't answer anythi-"

The elevator light blinked once, twice, and then stabilized. With it, the male announcer's voice sputtered briefly as it soon faltered and disappeared. Even the elevator jazz stopped, replacing any sound in the confined space with an empty, foreboding silence.

The three glanced at each other. Whatever it was, this was it. No more thoughts of returning, no more thoughts of getting out alive without the portal gun.

Whoever the 'enemy' may be, they would have to stand up and fight.

Once more, the speakers came to life, and with them, a low, forcefully expressionless mechanical voice boomed into the elevator space.

\_"Hello, and Welcome to Aperture Science Computer Aided Enrichment Center."\_

This time, it was the voice of a \_female \_announcer.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Random story fun facts:<em>

\_1. The appearance of both Igor (full name Igor Karlsson) and Cindy (full name Cindy Pace) are based on Half-Life characters. Igor is based on Citizen 7 (Think John Freeman), while Cindy's appearance and personality is (loosely) based on one of the two main characters of the expansion pack Half-Life: Decay - Colette Green.\_

\_2. Originally, Atlas and P-body where to have a much larger role in the story, as well as Wheatley, who was to be a main character. That

idea became obsolete when I completed Half-Life episode 2.\_

\_3. The (F)ast, (U)biquitous, (C)harcolization (K)armatic care, and (Y)perite (O)rderly (U)ninhibition protection system are both not-so-straightforward messages from Aperture to Black Mesa.\_

## 11. Initiate Testing

"\_As instructed by my human resources guideline manual, a.k.a. 'Approaching Humans Without Them Sensing the Distress of Imminent Death'; I am morally obliged to engage in idle talk and go through this list of everyday remarks which have been scientifically studied and proven to have calming effects on wild animals. Please do not answer any of the following rhetorical questions."\_

The overhead voice seemed to buzz quietly as the elevator gave an unsoundly \_crank\_, and jolted to the left. Within the moving tube, the three occupants shuffled around uncomfortably, each reaching out for a rail, or the smooth (and not particularly helpful) sides of the glass wall to hold onto. Whatever degree of motion sickness any of them were feeling, it became profoundly worse with the sudden shift of direction.

"\_How is the weather up there? Do you like fish? Do you like cake? Do you like fish-shaped biological waste? Would you prefer radioactive waste? May I kindly have your Porsche? It's a very nice Porsche. Thank you for the very generous deposit of your Porsche at the front door of my residence."\_

The elevator continued its plummet down. Inside, the two humans (and alien) stayed silent, each attempting to keep their own thoughts to their own individual selves. But to say they were successful in their secrecy would be, in fact, the very opposite of what had actually happened in that small space of an elevator.

Her brow scrunched up and her jaw gaping open in invariable confusion and surprise, Alyx stared blankly up towards the empty white ceiling of the glass construct.

>Immediately unable to decide what to make of the monotone announcer, she continued to stare, her face flipping through a series of alternating grimaces and brow raising gazes. Had this been any other time, she may have taken the machine-voiced woman's words as 'funny' â€" maybe even touching on the rim of 'hilarious'. But now, in the situation of dangerous no return she was supposedly in, she didn't know what to think. This robot (if it was one) was definitely playing with them. It had to be.<p>

Uriah's thoughts were following a somewhat different pattern, though he showed it in a much less obvious manner than the rest of his comrades. His arms folded and leaning quietly on the glass walls of the elevator, he tapped his fingers, idly waiting for the 'pleasantries' - something he was not accustomed to within his own culture - to end.

Igor on the other hand, hadn't yet lifted his gaze from the ground.

"â€|\_And thank you for your voluntary deposit of all your jewelries in my right hand. May I inquire to your name?"\_

At that, the administrative voice came to a sudden stop, an almost expectant silence waiting after the unexpected question.

"Wait." Alyx's head shot up. "Our names? Are we supposed to answer that?" she asked, her eyes burrowing in suspicion.

"\_Affirmative. Of all past rhetorical questions, the last one was non-rhetorical. This question is mandatory for all arriving test subjects," \_the voice replied, its monotone, robotic tone of voice still unchanging.

At this, Alyx looked to her teammates, somewhat unsure of what to do next. On one hand, there was the possible danger of them being associated with Black Mesa spies - but on the other hand, there may as well be no actual danger at all. In fact, she was the only one in a somewhat direct association with Black Mesa, but from what Doug had said earlier, Aperture wasn't too kind to \_anyone\_ near the said facility.

Nonetheless, Uriah spoke up first, unknowing of Alyx's worries.

"â€|I am known by the title of 'Uriah'. It is pleasing to meet you," he rumbled, in his usual, vortiguant particular expression.

Igor recited his name next, an odd stutter following his still shaky voice.

"I-I'm Igor. Igor Karlsson."

And then soon enough, it was Alyx's turn. Grimacing slightly before she raised her ever-confident voice, she said, "My name's Alyx Vance." She ended promptly.

A small moment of nothingness followed, the whirring and odd whooshing of the elevator they were in the only sounds interfering with the blanket of silence coming after their reply to the mandatory question.

"\_The Aperture Enrichment Facilities thanks you for your contributions," \_the robot finally said, its voice booming within the small elevator.

"\_In a few minutes we will be arriving the first test chamber. As I am required by my protocols to keep interactions during testing at a minimal degree, this will be your final chance to express any inquiries or concerns. Remember: the Aperture Enrichment Facilities are not liable for any loss of valuable belongings, limbs, organs, or lives."\_

Again Alyx looked to her teammates, whom this time each responded quietly with a nod of their own. With a steady voice, Alyx tested the most immediate question in each of their minds;

"We've heard of an 'accident' with certain 'robots' occurring here some time ago. How did the Aperture Facilities become such a ruin?"

At this, the robot became silent for a while, a mournful, yet somehow

still robotic voice following in its place.

"\_Yes, there was an unfortunate accident with neurotoxin that had occurred here in the past. I am pained to say that neurotoxic gas previously used to rid of genetically mutated mantis-men had once leaked through both the offices and testing facilities, causing the multiple deaths of both scientists and test-subjects alike. Sadly, the neurotoxin was beyond my power of control during the time, and I had no power to stop it."\_

"But aren't you the administrative figure of this laboratory?" Alyx questioned, her expression betraying her disbelief. "Shouldn't you have had the power to control the air-changing facilities of the enrichment center, or at least the doors to block neurotoxic gas from spreading?"

"\_Affirmative. I did, in fact, have control over the doors that blocked the pathways of the neurotoxin. Unfortunately, that was not enough for me to stop the spread of gas."\_

"What do you mean?"

"\_Because I had to choose who to save," \_the voice replied, its robotic voice now eerily calm.

"\_And the weight of the moral calculations overheated my core, corrupting my system. I had blacked out for an approximate of three hours. By the time I awoke, it was too late to save anyone but those still within cryosleep."\_

"So you malfunctioned," Alyx said flatly. "That makes sense."

"\_Sadly, yes. But with heightened control of the facility in my newly-configured system, I was able to restore the facility to some degree."\_

"Newly configured?" Alyx raised a suspicious brow. "How did that happen?"

"\_Originally, several cores were attached to me, restricting my productivity and control. With the breakdown of my central core during the accident, my other, emotive-centric cores fizzed out, allowing me to delete them from my central system. Alternating some words, you could say that I was essentially 'freed', from my moral burdens during the incident."\_

"Ah, now I understand," Alyx said, unfolding her arms and placing them on her hips. "So your central system couldn't handle the moral weight of the situation, causing your breakdown. This in turn caused other, minor programs to fizz, allowing for the extra control of the main system to dominate the facility in the place of the scientists afterwards. This makes things a lot clearer. Thanks-" She paused, another thought occurring in her head. "-What's your name again?"

"\_I am the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System. They used to call me by the title of 'GLaDOS'," \_the robotic voice seemed to say slowly, seductively.

"\_I am pleased to serve you."\_

And with that, the descent of the elevator suddenly slowed to a stop, its once-dark surroundings lightening up, displaying a rounded landing room surrounded by giant screens.

"\_Initiate testing."\_

\* \* \*

><p>It was only until they'd reached the fourth test chamber when the talking began.<p>

So far they had only had to deal with cube and simple portal-based puzzles, giving them a clear insight into the capacity and meaning of Aperture-based portal technology. And it would've been absolutely true to say that they were impressed.

In fact, a certain someone stayed a small way apart from the rest, her mouth agape as she stared on to the unfamiliar technology.

"How the \_hell\_ was this invented 20 years ago?" she questioned with wide eyes.

Uriah nodded in agreement. "I am also very impressed by the technical prowess of the Aperture Science facilities."

Before the group, two odd-looking devices sat on pedestals, dominating the central space of the otherwise empty test chamber. Igor was the first to pick one of the devices up, quietly examining the smooth white machine as he rolled it around in his hands.

"â€|What's this?"

"\_That before you is the finest creation of Aperture Science - the Aperture Handheld Portal Device. Though it is still in beta, it is undoubtedly one of our most ingenious creations. This is the primary device you will be using for testing, and it will challenge the limits of portal technology; a science completed only by the prowess of our Aperture scientists," \_GLaDOS boomed overhead, the robot's voice brimming with a mechanical pride.

At this Alyx made a face, her face flushing.

Sure, it was true that Black Mesa had failed to complete their studies on portal technology and artificial intelligence while they were able to. And yes, it was true that their current technology was significantly more 'simple' compared to that of Aperture's creations. But that didn't mean that they were bad scientists, right? At least not any worse than Aperture's own, she thought.

Her dad worked at Black Mesa. There was no way their science was any less competent than Aperture's.

"\_Due to your 'special' circumstance as a trio, you will be required to have at least two devices in your possession. Testing will be individual, but will become progressively cooperative as the subjects go along."\_

"Understood." Uriah replied monotonously as he eyed the ceiling.

"\_Enjoy testing, and remember: bring your daughter to work day is the perfect time to have her tested."\_

With this the robotic voice cut off, leaving only the ambient buzzing of the facility in its place.

"Well that was quick." Alyx whispered as she picked up the second gun, fitting it neatly into her hands. "I thought it'd take longer."

"Yes, we are very fortunate." Uriah nodded in reply. "But come now, we must hurry to the next chamber." He nudged Alyx as they turned to leave. "I feel there may be something very important that we have missed."

\* \* \*

><p>Uriah was right.<p>

It didn't take long to figure out what it was; news from Doug, the Aperture scientist. He had yet to give any sign he knew they were underground - or alive, even. The electronic wristwatches they wore were as silent as the facility that surrounded them, spare the odd announcements from GLaDOS now and then.

The team, to say, was lost.

They had so far completed four tests with the Aperture Handheld Portal Device (which they had taken to calling the 'Portal gun'), but had no clue on how to get out of the facility. Before long, fatigue overtook them.

Panting and tired from the constant gravitational abuse on their legs, (falling was one thing; getting rocketed out of a poorly positioned portal onto a jumping platform was another thing completely) they'd stopped to rest by one of the testing area-connecting elevator rooms to catch their breath.

It was then when the buzzing started.

"Finally! It was about time you gave us a call." Alyx said towards the small wristwatch screen as she massaged her elbows and stretched.

"\_I'm sorry," \_the man muttered behind the cackling screen. "\_I got a littleâ€|caught up in my own thoughts."\_

At this, Igor looked up from the ground he was focusing on, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"No matter," Alyx replied, tapping her foot. "But for now we need some pointers to get out of here. And we need them fast. With the fatigue we've already experienced, we're not sure how long we can hold out."

"\_I understand," \_the man said quietly. "\_A friend knows- \_I\_ know that there's a temporary break in the chambers during chamber 14,



which shouldn't be far from your current position. Get there, and hide behind the loose panels located within the test chamber. You shouldn't miss it. It's a safe haven from \_Her\_ eyes, and we should be able to talk safely beyond her range of hearing."\_

"Any exit?" Alyx asked hopefully, a small gleam in her eyes. "It shouldn't be \_that\_ far off, right? We've gone pretty far â€" god knows how much time this is taking us."

"\_That's the thing," \_Doug said carefully, avoiding the woman's gaze. \_"If you \_want\_ to escape, you'll have to tread carefully. And with that I mean; you can't expose your true intentions, Uriah's 'talents', and definitely \_not\_ us talking. Because as much as I'd like to say that where you are is safe, I can't. With Her constantly upgrading the facility, I wouldn't be surprised if she had eyes somewhere in there already."\_

At this statement Alyx and Uriah looked around, their eyes tracing carefully over each screen (and their gaps) within the circular room.

"I do not detect any cameras," the alien finally said, his voice rumbling low.

"Me neither." Alyx nodded towards Uriah in agreement. "If anything, this place has no microphones and cameras â€" it's the perfect resting place, and we've been using it as such. I see no reason why we need to move any further than we are now to get an exit location."

"â€|\_Suit yourself," \_Doug replied, his face twisting into a small scowl. \_"But there are screens here. And I can't tell anyone of an exit until you guys move to a secure location â€" without any live mechanics."\_

And with that the feed cut off, leaving the team alone in silence.

"â€|Great." Alyx sighed, lowering her wrist. "Just perfect. What a time to be paranoid." She muttered, looking to her teammates as she saw Igor's face pale for the second time.

"Well, go we must, as we have no other option," Uriah mumbled, unaware of Igor's change in condition.

"â€|Yeah. You're right," Alyx replied quietly, slowly facing back to the alien. "Right now we have more things to worry about than Doug's paranoia."

\* \* \*

><p>[Chamber 14]<p>

The symbols glowed brightly on a pristine white screen, the bright lights behind the lighted sign blinkering just a little bit.

"This must be the place," Alyx said as she stretched, cracking her neck lightly.

Before the trio was an unnaturally clean and white chamber â€" within

it, two lasers and an elevated space in the middle of a room, on which a radio sat, its speakers blaring the cheery anthem of Aperture. A semi-wide room separated by glass on one corner where a button-holding stand lay, and a locked exit door before them, the chamber followed the pattern of all other chambers. The door behind them locked upon their entering the room, a loud 'click' following in its place.

Pristine, white, and even elegantly designed. But unlike what Rattmann had told them, there were no seams to be seen.

"The guy better be right," Alyx muttered as the trio set to work on solving the puzzle, quickly finding that the solution behind the concealed button.

The question behind the chamber "the mystery that bound them to that particular room" was easily solved. But to follow their real objective, to find something out of the ordinary, was not.

It was only when Uriah said he heard something that the others stopped and listened.

He was right.

Faintly, from behind the multitude of metal, glass, or whatever separated them from the next room, they could hear the faint sound of calming music, much unlike the cheery anthem that blared at them from just beyond their feet.

Setting to work on destroying the walls of the chamber, Alyx used the Discouragement Redirection Cube to cut a hole through the thin metal outer layer of the wall, in the direction of the unfamiliar sound. Astoundingly, it worked.

"\_What are you doing?" \_the alarmed voice of GLaDOS sounded as the wall was carved through, revealing a small opening into the next room.

"\_Stop that. You're breaking my facility." \_

"I'm sorry GLaDOS," Alyx whispered, setting down the cube. "But this is absolutely necessary."

Into the hole the others rushed in, closing the panel behind them as a camera urgently swerved to their direction.

Inside the small space between rooms was a mess.

Previously hidden vines and other vegetation covered the ceiling and the top of the walls, holding together what was left of already degenerating ceiling. By the end of the room was a small opening to the outside of the test chambers, where the trio could see nothing but a dark and seemingly endless void beneath. Metal and concrete debris littered the ground, the messiness of the room accented by a large, haphazardly aligned collection of cans that were labeled, 'beans'.

But of everything in that odd space of a room, what struck the team most was the walls. The chaotically drawn graffiti that surrounded them, and the small, rusted Aperture radio by the corner of the

room.

"What is this place?" Alyx questioned with wide eyes.

Beside her, Uriah had noticed the small radio as it had just sputtered and died off, and was trying (without much luck) to turn it back on.

Igor on the other hand, was (not so calmly) studying the graffiti, his brow scrunched up in confusion.

"Sucker's luck?" he muttered to himself.

On the wall before him was a chaotic image of what seemed like a man holding his face in his hands with books (or was it files?) flying over the man's head. Below the image, the words 'sucker's luck', 'exile', and 'too many variables' were scribbled upon the wall, embodying the sense of confusion and insanity the man felt as he viewed it.

That graffiti gave him the chills.

"Ah, by the order of the Nihilanth. Condemn the electronic that must work with the assistance of a Vortigunt," Uriah mumbled as he gave up trying to turn the radio on manually, instead conjuring a green ball of energy and pumping it into the small radio. "There it is."

Slowly the radio sputtered back to life, a quiet song playing as the small radio struggled to spit out the cackling sound.

"Exile, it takes your mind, again  
><em>\_You got suckers luck. Have you given up?  
><em>\_Does it feel like a trial?  
><em>\_Did you fall for the same empty answers again?"

"Huh, that must be the song we heard," Alyx remarked plainly. "I wonder if this graffiti has anything to do with it?"

"It's the lyrics of the song." Igor muttered in response. "Or at least, that's what it seems to be."

"Well, either way we've got to contact Rattmann," Alyx replied, turning the small knobs of her wrist watch device. "It's about time we got out of here."

\* \* \*

><p>It may have been a millennia before they finally got into contact with Rattmann.<p>

On the other side of the transmitter, within the otherwise safe perimeters of the white forest base, Doug waited nervously, his right thumb nail degrading quickly under yellowing, haggardly teeth. Yes, it had been long enough.

When the call finally came through, Doug heaved a sigh of relief, his shoulders relaxing as he answered the transmission.

"We're in." Alyx's face flickered on the large computer screen,

slight static obscuring Doug's view of the woman. "Now we need to know a way out."

"Yes, yes." Doug nodded eagerly, showing his willingness to comply. "Of course. I see you've reached your destination soundly â€" it shouldn't be too hard to get out of there, then."

Alyx nodded, her expression plaintive. "We haven't met much resistance â€" from anything in here, really. I still don't understand why we need these gasmasks and grenades."

"Well," Doug shrugged. "Nothing like being paranoid. Right?"

Beside Alyx, Igor turned his eyes away, biting his lip.

"Well, either way we need to get out of this place," Alyx said as she folded her arms. "And now would be a good time as ever to get started on our escape."

"Okay, I got it," Doug replied, feeling a nudge from his right â€" where his companion cube sat beside him.

"\_Just follow these directions,"\_ it whispered, making sure it made itself clear to Doug, and Doug alone.

"\_There's a catwalk underneath that chamber."

><em>"There's a catwalk underneath the chamber you're in," Doug repeated, steadying his voice.

"\_From the hole in the wall you should be able to fall straight onto it."

><em>"From that opening over there," Doug said as he pointed towards the wall behind them, "you should be able to fall straight onto it."

For a second, Alyx stared at the man incredulously, her eyes widening in surprise. "Wait a second, what do you mean by \_fall?\_"

><em>

"\_Oh, it's just 20 meters down."

><em>"Yeah, it's just 20 meters down- wait what?" Doug's head shot up in surprise.

"So, what, you expect us to fall 20 meters down, directly onto a catwalk?" Alyx raised her arms in irritation. "While at risk of falling into a deep, unknown void? This is bullshit. Completely ridiculous."

"Okay, okay, look, I'm sorry," Doug said pleadingly as he raised his hands in defeat. "I just thought â€" I just thought you guys had been given the anti-gravity shoes â€" you know, a device that allows you to fall thousands of meters without getting hurt? Um, it's hard to explainâ€"|"

"Anti-gravity â€" anti-gravity \_what,\_ I'm sorry?" Alyx seethed, disbelief clouding her eyes. "Doug, I'm sorry to break your little bubble, but if something like 'anti-gravity shoes' actually existed; if there was a device that allowed you to fall \_thousands of meters without getting hurt,\_ that's something I'd like to see!" she

scoffed. "Look, I'm not sure about you, but I have a small troop under my direct control. And right now, I am responsible for their survival, and the safe completion of this objective. "

Doug cringed instinctively, as Alyx's voice gradually rose. This was not supposed to happen.

"Now look here, Mr. Rattmann," Alyx thundered at the camera, her teammates looking to each other in understandable alarm. "All we've been doing is listening to your ridiculous demands " we've avoided GLaDOS like the plague, even though she's just a normal, incapable robot, we've avoided every goddamned camera you've asked us to, and we've come this far just to help you feel safe about talking to us!" Alyx exhaled noisily, her breath seething out through her teeth in anger. "All we need is a goddamned exit! A real one, not just some imaginary bullshit you came up with a second ago!"

"Alright, alright, just calm down," Doug sighed, his own patience wearing thin. "Trust me, everything I say to you is real. GLaDOS is a threat, whether you may think so now or not. Don't go near her, whatever you do."

"Yes, and?" Alyx said impatiently.

"There's an escape pod just beneath her chamber," he said, his eyes gradually avoiding Alyx's silent glare. "If you go indirectly, there is the possibility you could reach it without any harm. But"

"But what?" Alyx prompted, her eyes narrowing in anticipation.

"It's going to take 20 more chambers from your location before you can reach it directly."

Alyx scowled, immediately looking down to massage the bridge of her nose. "Any other good news you have yet to tell us about?"

"That's the only way out."

As Alyx raised her head to go off on another tandem, Igor reached a hand from behind her, quietly tapping the woman on her shoulder.

"There's something I have to tell you about."

\* \* \*

><p>Finally, Igor broke.<p>

The more he listened to their conversation, the more he became disillusioned by Doug Rattmann's sanity and stability as a guide.

Of course, he trusted Alyx more than he trusted Doug " as a doctor, he had no choice.

When Alyx finally turned to the camera, her eyes wide, she said nothing at first.

Then she blurted out, "You're schizophrenic?!"

At this Doug groaned, his hand palming him straight in the face. "\_Oh please don't tell me this is going to be a problem."\_

"Of course this is a problem!" she almost yelled, exasperated. "Ugh, we should've never trusted you!" She inhaled, attempting to calm herself. "â€|We've come to an agreement anyway. We're not going to rely on you any longer."

"\_Hey, wait a minute!"\_

"Goodbye, Doug Rattmann." Alyx waved towards the small transmitter as she headed towards the opening they had entered through earlier. "Whether you like it or not, we are going, our \_own\_ way."

At this she shut the transmitter, minimizing Doug's objections into a single, small beep.

\_Transmission Ended\_

They had had enough.

\* \* \*

><p>As the trio exited the small entrance, GLaDOS swiveled towards the camera screen, her optic narrowing thinly.<p>

They were going to pay for what they did to her facility, sooner or later.

"â€|\_In his well-known thought experiment, SchrÃ¶dinger came to the final conclusion that cats liked small, secluded spaces. Just like boxes. Filled with deadly neurotoxin. I didn't know that applied to humans- and aliens as well."\_

Below her, the woman named Alyx rolled her eyes â€" a very human sign of disbelief and surprise.

"GLaDOS," the human said, staring straight into the optic of the camera. "We want to see your main chamber."

For a second, not a word came out of GLaDOS' speakers, her surprise momentarily too large for her act to conceal.

"\_Well, wellâ€|"\_

If she could, she would've smiled.

"\_You will be my very first guests in a long time, I suppose."\_

Gears rolled into place as the test chamber creaked, just a little bit.

"\_And I am honored. So on my artificial life, I swear,"\_

A tube slid unto an opening above the test chamber and clicked, the trio finally noticing and moving around in uncertainty.

"â€|\_That I will make you regret this."\_

Let there be darkness.

## 12. Lab Rats

\_Author's Note: Well, I think I've just updated at a completely new speed - Valve speed. Hopefully that means I've also reached Valve quality, but that's probably not the case. Well, one can dream.\_

\_Anyway, I just want to give a shout out\_ \_to all you people following my story - man I'm third on the search engine (of portal and half-life crossovers) thanks to you guys. There's no way I can abandon this story now. Special thanks to my proof-reader, SweetChristabel (who I still can't believe is doing this for me). Special, special thanks to the guys who've been supporting me on Tumblr as well - amouat, I'm talking directly to you. And last of all, thank you Axell00, who's reviews I await with as much anticipation as people await my story. Thanks for listening to my idiotic blithering, and enjoy the story folks.\_

\* \* \*

><p>For a second, she thought she'd gone blind.<p>

The dull, pulsing red light hit her before anything else. The permeating glow of the round explosive seemed to blink in slow-motion, appearing from a glass tube in the ceiling she hadn't seemed to notice before. By the time she took a hesitant step back, it was far too late.

The ball exploded, its outer shell fracturing into a million tiny pieces. The white light and deafening sound that followed shut down every sense she had, stopping time for what felt like an eternity.

Quietly, she shut her eyes.

Gravity seemed to shift sideways as she flew backwards. For a second her body levitated from the ground - only to crash into the wall with distinct \_crack \_and a loud grunt of pain.

Red seeped into her eyesight as she landed heavily the ground, recoiling into herself. She would have been amazed if every bone in her body wasn't broken by now.

Dazed and barely conscious, she looked around her. In the now small space of a room, Uriah was nowhere to be seen. Beside her own burnt arm, Igor wasn't doing much better. His body limp and his face kissing ground, he lay unconscious, his left hand bent in an unnatural angle. Was he dead? No, he couldn't be.

The world spinning around her, and a searing pain running through the arm that she had shielded herself with, Alyx crawled towards him. Above her, the ceiling began to crumble.

"â€|Hey," she said, catching back a gasping breath. "Hey, wake up."

\_No. No, no, no, no, no. \_The words resonated in Alyx's mind as she

slapped him lightly, her movements getting ever more frantic by the second. \_I can't lose him. Not another one.\_

Around her, the room had begun to implode within itself, its fragile walls crumbling from above her. Black and white panels came crashing down, exposing the thick metal skeleton of the building that held the moving room together. Above the two was an infinite space of black, small blue lights flickering busily in the distance.

"\_My, my. Just look at the mess you've wrecked on to my facility."\_

GLaDOS seemed to snicker from around them, her low mechanical voice resonating smoothly above the two.

Alyx stared above her in silence, her shock too large for her to manage any sort of retort.

\_Doug was right.\_

As quickly as the thought cut through her mind, it was gone, leaving resonating echoes of the things she could have done in its place.

"â€|Goddamnit." She gripped her hand as it trembled.  
"\_Goddamnit.\_"

Gripping Igor tightly by the shoulder, she shook the medic violently.  
"Damn it, Igor, \_wake up!\_"

His eyes fluttered open, gazing drearily onto Alyx's blurred features. A gasp escaped his lungs as he rose, coughing violently from the dust the falling rubble had spread.

Alyx sighed in relief. One life was spared.

â€|But what about the other?

Alyx looked around quickly, ignoring the burning pain in her right arm. Rubble now surrounded the two humans, cutting them off from the other section of the room â€" the section where the den lay. Uriah was nowhere to be seen. And neither was their luggage, which held the medical supplies they were instructed to bring.

Alyx continued to stare at the disaster in silence, thoughts crisscrossing her mind as fast as lightning.

Uriah was dead.

"â€|\_What a shame." \_GLaDOS seemed to sigh apathetically. \_"The subject I was most interested in â€" now gone. Organics are \_such \_fragile little things."\_

Dumbfounded, Alyx could barely even manage to blink. Beside her, Igor had finally ceased his coughing fits, realization striking his pale face.

\_This wasn't supposed to happen.\_

"\_But who are we to blame for such intangible things as fate? Even if



one subject is gone, Science must continue."\_

Unconsciously, Alyx's hand had curled up into a fist. Before she realized it herself, her face was set in a growl, her dark eyes glaring fixedly at the red camera before her.

\_THIS WASN'T SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN.\_

"\_Mustn't it now?"\_

~oOo~

â€|This wasn't supposed to happen.

Pacing around in his room, he held his head in his hands, groaning loudly. He had tried to contact them after that, several times. But the line had gone dead on his end, and he had no idea why.

What if something had happened to them?

What if GLaDOS had found out about their little ploy?

What if they just refused to contact him and threw away their devices?

Unfortunately, that was the most probable of the three.

"â€|\_Don't go \_that \_down on yourself, Doug," \_Cube chirped beside him. \_"If it's any comfort to you, they're probably doing just fine on their own by now. Most likely just working out a better solution to the problem."\_

"â€|I know." Doug sighed as he sat down beside the cube, his head still resting on his calloused knuckles. "But how long do you think that's gonna last? We both know that there's only one way out."

"\_Two, actually," \_Cube replied, nodding mentally. \_"The escape pod, or death."\_

For a second, Doug just stared at his friend.

"â€|Please don't say that again." He looked away.

"\_Yeah," \_Cube agreed. \_"I'm sorry, that was a terrible joke."\_

For some minutes, the two stared at the large TV monitor in front of them in silence, waiting for the static to cease. Around them, a monotonous nothing continued, an anxious silence blanketing the human and cube.

"â€|\_Do you wish you were there?" \_Cube asked, its voice ringing quietly in Doug's ears.

"What do you mean?" He turned to his friend.

"\_I mean,"\_ Cube repeated, clearing its metaphorical throat, \_"do you wish you were down there? Inside Aperture with them?"\_

"â€|" Doug looked away in silence, his hands clenching and

unclenching in idle nervousness. "Of course I do," he replied silently. "Of course I wish I was down there. Guiding them. Fighting with them, even." He looked down on his hands, massaging his face with them for the nth time that hour. "What do you think? I feel like a coward, just sitting here and doing nothing."

"Yeah," \_Cube would've nodded. "Yeah, I get what you mean. To think, after all the time we've spent getting out of there, that we'd even consider getting back in."

"True," Doug replied idly. "But there's a difference from before — now we've got lives at stake down there, and not just our own. Not just \_hers\_. Everyone here's already lost more than they should have. We can't afford to mess this mission up. Even with the price of ourselves."

"Cube remained silent. "You act as if you're disposable. But I know you aren't. You know you aren't. And that's why we stayed here, isn't it?"

"Doug didn't reply.

"We can't do anything now, true. But maybe we don't need to. Maybe not now. But our time will come, inevitably. It always does," \_Cube chirped optimistically. "All we need to do is wait. All we can do is hope for the best."

~oOo~

Before everything turns to hell.

Alyx slumped on the ground, daintily caressing her burnt right arm. It hurt like hell, and their lack of provisions wasn't doing anything to dull the pain. Beside her, Igor was in even worse condition, securing his broken left hand with a hastily put together cast made of splintered metal and cloth binds.

"Here," Igor said, tossing a roll of white cloth towards Alyx. "Bind your arm with this. It's not much, but it should keep your burn scars from further damage."

"Thanks." Alyx replied gratefully, catching the last remains of their lost baggage. "I owe you one."

Sighing, she set to work on her own arm, lying against a large mound of rubble that had formed after the explosion.

To think, it had barely been an hour since they lost Uriah.

Alyx had exploded in anger after their ordeal with GLaDOS, throwing a rather hefty piece of rubble at the red camera that seemed to mockingly watch their every move. That had successfully unhinged the fragile camera, destroying it — and GLaDOS's method of spying on them — leaving the two alone in a protected space of privacy.

Unfortunately, that hadn't stopped GLaDOS from talking.

"My, you humans are \_such \_horrible little creatures, aren't you?" \_she spoke, as her voice rose in a mockingly disdained tone.

\_"Running away from my cleverly constructed tests, defacing my facility â€" just like filthy little rodents. Yes, that's what you are."\_

Alyx ignored her to the best of her abilities, working on the binds that now covered her right arm. As she worked on healing herself, Igor looked on to the rubble, a rough look overcoming his usually gentle features.

"\_You are all the same. Just little rats running around in circles, trying to escape. But progress requires sacrifices, and freedom is one of them."\_

Alyx bared her teeth in silence, her fury just barely controlled under a façade of calmness. As she clumsily tied the knot with her left hand and teeth, Igor stiffly checked the damage done to his left hand. Flinching as he brought it up, he attempted to rotate it. It didn't move.

"Great." He sighed, letting it fall gently back into position. "I'm not going to be of much use anymore."

Alyx looked to him, concern in her eyes. "Don't be like that," she said through a tight-lipped frown. "We're gonna make it."

Igor smiled, briefly. "Yeah. I hope so."

"\_Are you two done doing whatever the hell it is you do when two humans are stranded in a life or death situation?" \_GLaDOS seemed to sigh, as if bored. \_"Well, even if you're not, Science must continue, and progress must be done."\_

Around the two, gears from beyond the walls could be heard moving, escorting the box of a test chamber to the lower levels of the facility. The ground shook from beneath them as the whole room seemed to rumble, separating the middle parts of the chamber from each other. Rubble from the pile that had built up in the center fell through, as Alyx hastily walked away from where she was previously sitting.

Below them, was nothing. A void of darkness met their eyes, blinding them and making their knees shake, ever so slightly.

As they descended, cut off from the other section of the room, Alyx could see blocks in the distance â€" an infinite number of test chambers floating around them, suspended in perpetual nothingness. And before the two, they saw a catwalk.

It was most likely the catwalk Doug had mentioned, connecting the chambers like a back alleyway through the city. In the shadows, she thought she could see something move.

\_20 meters down.\_

Doug's words resonated in her head as they passed the catwalk, delving deeper into the abyss of Aperture. \_How far are we going?\_

"â€|\_Because I am a merciful, understanding life form, I will allow you to see my chamber."\_

Alyx's head shot up at those words, anticipation brightening up her weary features.

"\_But this is a reward, not a given, and I will require you two to continue on your co-operative testing."\_

Her face fell instantly, as she grit her teeth and sighed.

"This is \_bullshit,\_" she seethed as she massaged her temples.

"Hey," Igor said, a small smile on his own features. "At least we have a clear goal now. It might not be a way out, but if we can make it there, I'm sure we can make it out."

Reluctantly, Alyx nodded. "Yeah."

"We lived through the past tests, and we lived through this. We're not going to mess up, not now, not ever."

Alyx's smile became a little brighter. "Yeah."

As the two looked at each other, the ground shook as they finally reached their destination.

"\_Here we are," \_GLaDOS spoke mechanically. \_"Finally the lift seems to have ended. You know, it's much harder trying to move a whole room than it is a tube or an elevator. I could have accidentally, 'dropped' you two down in the pits of facility. But who would have wanted that? Oh, not me, of course. Why would you even think that?"\_

The exit door slid open as the two stepped outside, picking up a slightly damaged portal gun from beneath a pile of untouched rubble. The other one was gone, probably on the other side of the room they had left, or fallen down to the unknown void below. Feeling the comforting weight of the gun in her hands, Alyx breathed in slowly.

\_Well, it can't get any worse than this, can it? \_

~oOo~

"\_You idiot!" \_P-body beeped towards Atlas.

"\_What?!" \_Atlas replied, swinging its arms around. \_"I'm doing the best I can!"\_

"\_Well, obviously your best isn't good enough." \_P-body huffed, crossing its spindly arms together. \_"We've been at this area for hours now. We definitely aren't doing \_something \_right."\_

"\_Then you try to solve this!" \_Atlas responded, pointing at the mess that was once an office hub. \_"If you can find a disk from this mound of debris, then I'll give you my week's rations of Aperture Science Ground Fish Electric Fuel. Really. I'll do that."\_

"\_Yeah?" \_P-body would've smirked, turning a sharp gaze to the mountain of rubble. \_"Leave it to the master," \_P-body said

smugly.

Pointing at the ground below the small hill with its portal gun, P-body shot a light orange portal underneath it. Then pointing its gun at the ceiling within the small room P-body shot another portal, the mound of messily arranged papers and other documents falling through the first opening. As the mound dispersed itself onto the floor, a shiny object bounced up, landing on top of the rubble of files and dust that had accumulated in the old office room. It was the disk.

Its eye agape in shock and wonder, Atlas turned to its partner. \_"How'd ya know that that would happen?"\_

P-body walked daintily towards the disk, picking it up primly in its free left hand. \_"Gravity, my friend."\_

"\_But â€"\_" Atlas objected, a raising a desperate finger. \_"That was just luck! I didn't even know the floor was covered in lunar gel!"\_

"\_Aha," \_P-body folded its arms together yet again. \_"But you knew that the ceiling was covered in it."\_

"\_Butâ€|but!" \_Atlas flailed its arms. \_"That's not fair!"\_

"\_Yeah it is."\_ P-body would've grinned. \_"You knew that all the walls were covered in lunar gel. You could've \_easily \_figured out that the ceiling was too. See? We both knew that this would've happened. It's completely fair."\_

"\_Ugh," \_Atlas gave up, shrugging disappointedly. \_"â€|Fine, fine. You win. I'll give you my week's rations."\_

"\_Yes!" \_P-body fist-bumped the air as it jumped up in glee. \_"I told you there was a better way!"\_

"\_Yeah, yeah," \_Atlas beeped as it let out a low sound reminiscent of a sigh, folding its arms together. \_"Let's just get this over with."\_

As the two approached the flat box with a slit for the disk in the middle of it, (an antique device known as the 'CD processor'), P-body pressed a small button, booting up the slow machinery. As they offered the disk to the mechanical equivalent of an ancient being, it sucked it in, devouring the dusty memory device whole.

P-body gulped and pulled its hand back as it watched the slow degradation of the treasure they had just found, taking a respectful step away from the device.

On the wall before it, colours flashed, the words [UPLOADING] appearing on the massive projection. What was once a white screen turned dark brown, the yellow logo of Aperture appearing on the display.

Hesitantly, Atlas took a step forward, taking its position right beside its partner.

"â€|\_You know," \_it said slowly. \_"I've always wondered what these

were for."\_

"\_What do you mean?" \_P-body responded, facing an eye towards Atlas.  
\_"They're for GLaDOS, aren't they?"\_

"\_Yeah, but," \_Atlas objected quietly. \_"I mean, what does she do with them? Does she eat them, like the device?"\_

P-body let out a high pitched giggle, covering the higher part of its torso with its hand. \_"No, you silly!" \_it chirped playfully as it patted its friend on the back. \_"These things are for information. She probably uses them to get smarter."\_

"\_But GLaDOS is already smart."\_

"\_Well," \_P-body replied. \_"There are probably things even she doesn't know."\_

"\_I guessâ€¦" \_Atlas looked down.

"\_Either way, we've got to get moving soon," \_P-body beeped, pointing towards the exit. \_"I'm pretty sure GLaDOS won't be pleased if we stay too long in here," \_it said as it walked towards the door, turning away from the large screen that was now flooded with various pictures of people in white lab attire.

"\_Yeah," \_Atlas replied, turning away from the screen. \_"I guess you're right."\_

In Atlas's peripheral vision, it could still see the reflections of words as they ran down the screen, flying faster than the human eye could follow. As the robot walked away from the messy office area, it could hear a small \_beep\_ from the processors, and the quiet sound of final words being inputted into the projection.

\_Black Mesa Employee List\_

\_Update into Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System  
completed\_\_

~oOo~

It had been four test chambers since the explosion.

Their sense of time had gone awry from the bright lights and the adrenaline pumped into the air, which barely kept the two from falling from fatigue. It had most likely been around twelve hours since they'd been on the surface. But to them, it felt like a week.

They were that tired.

Fatigued from using their bodies and minds to the limits of physics and logic itself, the two found themselves very discouraged. Alyx had realized how on edge she'd become since the explosion â€" fighting against her thoughts and even her sole partner, Igor. She had bickered with him more than once, feeling like she had no choice else but to give up on ever completing the tests and returning to the surface.

Massaging her temples thoroughly, she sighed.

"Hey," Igor said worriedly, putting his functional hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay? If you're tired we can rest for a while?"

"I'm fine," she almost snapped, pushing his hand away. "We can't stay here forever, Igor. You know that. We have to keep moving."

For a second, Igor stared at her, an obvious look of hurt in his eyes.

Alyx grit her teeth. She was doing it again.

"It's â€" it's okay," she said quietly, turning away from his gaze. "I'm fine. I really am."

"â€|You sure?" Igor replied, a tired tinge to his voice. "You don't need to worry too much â€" look, we'll make it back up. I'm sure we will. Somehow."

Alyx sighed again, more at herself than anything else. He was in even worse-off condition than her, and yet she was the one being comforted. This would've been a terrible joke, if anything.

"â€|I know," she responded quietly as she turned back to him. "Thanks, Igor." She forced a thin smile.

Igor nodded, smiling back.

"Now," Alyx looked towards the chamber. "We have to get out of here."

Before the two was the end of another test, with an empty white hallway stretching out in the distance. In the middle of the hallway, she could see a depression between the walls to her right, and one turret situated within it. Around it was all black panels, with no portable surfaces near their location. In reach of her portal gun she held a cube with six pink hearts adorning every side, its dull pink glow softly lightening their dark surroundings.

When she had first picked the cube up, she felt a strange sense of Deja Vu â€" someone she knew around her had definitely been carrying this around. But she didn't remember who it had been, and as quickly as the feeling came, it disappeared.

They had only one challenge left.

She understood clearly what they had to do â€" they needed to utilize the cube as a shield to protect themselves from the rain of bullets the turret would shoot at them. The metal casing of the box would protect them from the bullets, and if they approached carefully enough, knock down the turret from where it was standing. This was their last step. There was no other way to solve the puzzle.

Knowing that, the two had been resting for some time, preparing themselves for the dangerous task ahead. One step wrong, and they both could end up a victim to the turret.

Alyx looked up, expecting another wry comment from GLaDOS for being

idle so long. To her relief, she remained silent.

Alyx inhaled slowly. "We can do this." She turned to Igor. "Are you ready?"

He nodded, gulping nervously in response. "Yeah, I am."

The two shielded themselves with the cube as they took their first steps, walking slowly alongside it. Alyx gripped the portal gun in the tense silence, nervousness overcoming her.

One, two, three meters. A few more and they would reach the turret.

Around them the facility buzzed in electrical activity, mechanical gears and the sound of a large energy processor sounding distantly through the walls. Small white lights on the ceiling guided their way as the two crouched and walked, hiding behind the large cube.

Above them, GLaDOS was silent.

Alyx nodded to her partner. "We're gonna make this."

Quietly, he nodded back.

"\_Well, well." \_GLaDOS remarked plainly, the sound of her voice ringing through the invisible radios. \_"In my absence, you two seem to have made a large bit of progress."\_

Alyx looked down, muttering a curse beneath her breath. She had hoped to not hear that voice again.

"\_I'm a little\_ surprised, to be honest. I thought you wouldn't make it this far. Not many people have." \_She seemed to sigh. \_"Humans often make wasteful science."\_

The two crept towards the turret as she spoke, taking small, careful steps.

"\_I'm surprised you even came down here at all. Not that it was all completely unexpected."\_

One, two, three steps. They were almost in front of the turret.

"\_There are \_so \_many things down here that would be desirable from where you came from. The portal gun, for instance. Or our portal technology." \_GLaDOS paused. "\_Do you not think so? Alyx Vance?"\_

\_What's happening? \_Alyx raised her brow slightly as she continued on forward. This was the first she had been called by her name by GLaDOS.

"\_Or should I say\_"

The cube seemed to fizzle before her, disappearing to nothing in mid-air as she let out an exclamation of surprise.

Beside her, the turret sensed movement, spreading its gun



compartments to shooting position.

"â€|\_you Black Mesa thief."\_

The red laser of the turret tracked the two humans down, landing quietly, directly on Alyx's head.

"\_Target acquired."\_

~oOo~

Doug Rattmann held his head in his hands.

Fatigued from worry and boredom, he was half-asleep, dozing off slowly in front of the large TV monitor screens.

It had been roughly four hours since the last transmission.

Before him, the monitors buzzed in static, its screens showing the blurred grey lines of a broken television channel. It loomed above the man and cube as the sun through the windows threatened to set, staining the sky in a vivid bright orange and purple hue.

From the radio, Doug thought he could hear a distant voice.

"â€|\_or..Ratmannâ€|\_"\_

He ignored it, assuming it a part of his usual hallucinations.

"\_Pleaseâ€|we're still hereâ€|\_"\_

He closed his eyes tightly, hoping that whatever was bothering him would go away soon.

"â€|\_Doctorâ€|Rattmannâ€|\_"\_

It didn't.

Quietly, he opened his eyes, massaging them with a groan. Drowsily, he looked above him, to the large television screens that disturbed his sleep.

For a second, he couldn't recognize what he saw.

~oOo~

"â€|Oh my god."

Alyx cupped a hand over her mouth as she stood above him, surveying the mess that lay before her.

By her feet, Igor's body lay bloody and barely conscious. Beside him, the turret laid on its side, deactivated.

Blood seeped through the man's shirt and unto the floor, staining the black panels with a dark, dull, red. Igor was still breathing, but not by much.

"Oh my god," Alyx whispered again.

When the turret had activated on the defenseless two, Igor had pushed Alyx away, taking a blunt of the blows that the turret had shot. Two bullets had dug through the lower parts of his stomach, setting themselves deep within his body as he fell.

Reacting quickly, Alyx threw the portal gun at the turret, knocking it over. Stray bullets had threatened to hit her, but fortunately the worst they had done was graze through her clothes, cutting open a small piece of her jacket sleeve. She was okay.

Igor, on the other hand, was not.

Groaning quietly, the man had curled up on himself, pushing the wound in with shaking hands to stop the bleeding. Sweat beaded his forehead as he writhed slightly in pain, making a valiant effort to stand up. Slipping on his own blood, he fell back down.

"I â€" I can help." Alyx stuttered as she took off the binds that concealed the burn scars on her arm, tying them tightly around Igor's waist.

Even as she tied the white cloth around him, blood still seeped from the wound, threatening to drown the two in it. He was losing blood very, very fast.

"Stay still," She ordered him as he tried to help, barely gripping the binds with a bloody hand. "This is the best I can do to fix you up."

Seething in pain, Igor attempted to respond. "Th-thanks â€"

"Shh, be quiet," she told him as gently as she could, forcing a smile. "You'll make it."

\_But I don't know for how long.\_

He smiled back weakly, nodding.

"\_Hm," \_GLaDOS remarked, unimpressed. "\_I can't say I am not pleasantly surprised that you've survived that. But I must say â€" your friend there looks very, very pale. I suppose he has a medical condition." \_GLaDOS paused. "\_Possibly skin retardation. Or imminent death. It was a problem for my other test subjects who had been hit by turrets as well."\_

Alyx grit her teeth as she looked to the camera, fury threatening to overthrow her calm façade.

"This is all your fault!" she almost yelled towards the camera, her body hunched up over Igor. "Why did you do that?!"

For a second, GLaDOS remained silent, leaving Alyx's question hanging in the air.

"\_Either way,"\_ she said mechanically. "\_You've solved the test chamber. Congratulations."\_

The exit door unlocked as it slid open, revealing the glass elevator

leading to the next test chamber.

"â€|Do you expect us to test after injuries like these?" she asked quietly, her dark eyes still glaring at the camera.

"\_Of course," \_GLaDOS replied promptly.

"â€|" For a moment, Alyx contemplated her options. She knew it was a long shot to protest or ask help from GLaDOS, but with Igor losing blood at the rate that he was, she had no other choice.

"GLaDOSâ€|" Alyx said as she bit down her pride, supporting Igor as he stood up. "We need immediate medical assistance. If we don't get any soon, Igor might die."

"â€|" GLaDOS didn't respond.

Alyx sighed. This was bad. Very bad.

"â€|It's okay," Igor seethed through his teeth in pain. "I'll be fine. We just need to move to the next chamber. We can't stay here. The longer we do, the less I'll be able to hold on."

Hesitantly, Alyx nodded. He was right.

Taking small steps forward, the two walked slowly towards the glass elevator. As they reached it, the elevator descended, taking the two even deeper into the facility.

For several precious minutes, GLaDOS remained silent.

"â€|\_I've been considering your proposition for medical assistance," \_she said monotonously. \_"And I've come to a certain conclusion."\_

Alyx perked her ears up, taking in GLaDOS's every word.

"\_And my conclusion is â€"" \_She paused for effect. \_"That you don't need it."\_

At this, both Igor's and Alyx's shoulders sagged in disappointment. Why they had come to expect any better, they didn't know.

"\_Especially you, Alyx Vance."\_

She cocked her head at this, looking up to the ceiling of the small elevator. This was the second time she had been called by her full name.

"\_Or should I say, the family of Eli Vance."\_

"â€|!" Alyx took an instinctive step back. "â€|How do you know my father?"

"\_Aha. So my theory was correct."\_

Alyx looked away. She'd been caught in a trap.

"\_See, I've been thinkingâ€|" \_GLaDOS said in a low, quiet voice.

"Plans change. Science changes. But people do not change." \_She seemed to sigh. \_"And I believe that they stay the same over generations. Eons of years, maybe."\_

"â€| " The two remained silent.

"\_You are the daughter of an important Black Mesa employee â€" the daughter of a thief."\_

Alyx growled, her hands curling up into fists. "â€|You know nothing about him."

"\_Oh, but I know what he did," \_she said quietly. \_"And trust me, I've been here longer than you have ever been alive."\_

Alyx didn't respond.

As the two stood there, the elevator jolted once to the right, changing direction. From the dark shadows around her, light began to show. She could see the silhouettes of wires that surrounded her, the walls seeming to get closer to each other as they entered a small lit space from the vast nothingness they were in. Something was different about their surroundings.

"Where are you taking us?" Alyx asked, more out of worry than anything else.

"\_Well," \_GLaDOS said as the elevator came to a slow stop, landing before a connection of rooms and a short hallway. \_"You said that you wanted to see my chamber."\_

The two stepped out of the elevator as Alyx supported Igor, who was now breathing heavily.

"\_And I decided that keeping my promise would benefit the both of us, not just me."\_

Another locked door before them opened, exposing a wide area filled with dark panels and a large object suspended dormant in the middle of the room.

As the two walked in, the suspended object seemed to turn around slowly, the tense air around them getting even worse as the silence continued.

"Hello again, Alyx Vance." The speakers rang as the source of the voice was identified, the two people gaping at the white object before them.

"And welcome to my chamber." She paused. "Thief."

End  
file.